

As bad as it gets

1974-75: The Washington Capitals' inaugural season

Back in 1959-60, the Washington Presidents of the Eastern Hockey League skated to a nondescript 25-34-5 record. At season's end, the Presidents—and thus, professional hockey—left the District of Columbia. Not until another president—namely Richard M. Nixon—vacated the District would the fastest game on ice return.

Throughout the summer of 1974, the eyes of the nation—and indeed, the world—were focused on Washington and the crumbling Nixon presidency. Meanwhile, pro hockey was coming back, as the NHL's Washington Capitals were taking shape along with their sparkling new home in Landover, the Capital Centre.

Two summers earlier, Washington construction magnate Abe Pollin began vying for an NHL expansion franchise. Pollin, owner of the Baltimore Bullets (now the Washington Wizards) of the NBA, hoped to pair a hockey club with his hoops team in a new multi-purpose facility in the Washington area. Pollin was competing against nine other applicants for just two NHL franchise openings, but his tireless lobbying and the promise of a new arena overcame what one Las Vegas bookmaker claimed were 600-to-1 odds against Washington joining the NHL. Hockey was coming back to DC.



Capital Centre, opened in 1973

Construction on the Capital Centre took just 15 months from start to finish, and the venue hosted other events—including a Grateful Dead concert in July, 1974—prior to its debut as a hockey arena. When the building did open for hockey business, it was widely acclaimed for its splendor and its amenities. With its luxury suites, unobstructed seating and state of the art scoreboard, the Capital Centre instantly became one of the best hockey facilities in the NHL.

The scoreboard in particular added to the quality of life; not only for fans, but for players and coaches as well.

"The Montreal Canadiens come to town," recalls Capital icon Yvon Labre, "and there's a replay on the Telescreen. [Canadiens coach Scotty] Bowman and all the Canadiens are watching the replay! And I'm just amazed at this. I'm just sitting back and going, 'Look at them! This is good.' It was the first building to have it. For coaches, that was fantastic, you could watch the replay right away."

"There wasn't a bad seat in the house and it was a beautiful arena," says Ron Lalonde, who was a center on that first Caps team. "Especially when it was full," he adds.

Pollin was very much involved in the building of the Capital Centre, and not just from a financial standpoint. But when it came to building the team that would skate onto the ice, he entrusted that task to one of hockey's most distinguished figures, former Boston Bruin Hall of Famer Milt Schmidt.

Pollin shopped around for a general manager to serve as the architect for the Capitals. Schmidt says that Boston Celtics executive Red Auerbach, recommended him for the post. "Red was pretty good friends with Abe Pollin," says Schmidt. "I've always been close to Red, and I think Red was the one that got them interested in me."

By virtue of a coin flip, Washington gained the first overall choice in the amateur entry draft, while the other NHL newcomers, the Kansas City Scouts, selected first in the expansion draft. But the pool of available talent was quite shallow.

Players from Europe and the US were much more scarce in 1974, and the feverish competition for talent between the NHL and the upstart World Hockey Association also thinned the list of available players.



"What we had to draw from in those years was much less than expansion teams at the present time," Schmidt relates. "The World Hockey Association has just started, and you'd have to give a \$15,000 or \$20,000 player \$30,000 or more, otherwise they were going to go to the WHA."

The expansion draft took place on June 12, 1974. Schmidt began the process by selecting two goaltenders—Ron Low from Toronto and Michel Belhumeur from Philadelphia. Six defensemen and 16 forwards were also chosen.

The WHA also posed a threat to the up and coming amateur talent, as the new league began to sign players before they were old enough to be eligible for the NHL draft. In 1974, the NHL lowered the draft age, allowing its clubs to select one 18-year-old in the first two rounds of the draft.

After taking defenseman Greg Joly with the first overall pick, Schmidt took left winger Mike Marson, an 18-year-old, with the team's second selection. Marson, who was to become just the second Afro-North American to play in the NHL, had indeed been in contact with a WHA club.

"At the time, the people who were representing me were talking to [the] Vancouver [Blazers]," remembers Marson. "There were a lot of guys who were—I'm sure—considering offers to play in the WHA at that time."

Four of the players chosen by Schmidt in the expansion draft were taken from the Bruins organization. He was familiar with those players from his days in Boston. Soon after the draft, Schmidt imported another trio of players—each in cash transactions—from his Boston days.

First and foremost, Schmidt needed a captain for his young team. A week after the expansion draft, he purchased 40-year-old defenseman Doug Mohns from the Atlanta Flames. Mohns began his NHL career with the Bruins in 1953-54, when Schmidt was winding down his own stellar playing career. Schmidt took over as the Bruins' coach immediately after his playing career ended, and

Mohns played for him in Boston for the better part of a decade.

"I knew that Mohns was a real fantastic skater and that he was a real good team man," says Schmidt of his decision to acquire Mohns and make him the Capitals' first captain. "I knew that he was equally as good off the ice as he was on. We needed some leadership on that hockey club because we had a lot of kids that hadn't played much in the National Hockey League. I just thought that by getting somebody like Doug, he would instill some of his thoughts and his way of thinking and that it would be a great asset to us. Plus it gave us some real good experience, which we needed badly."

More experience came from the Bruins a month later when Schmidt obtained the late Tommy Williams. One of the few American players in the league at that time, Williams had been a member of the 1960 Gold Medal US Olympic team. He went on to star for the Bruins in the 1960s before jumping to the WHA in 1972-73. Schmidt acquired Williams' rights from the Bruins, then convinced him to leave the WHA for a regular role with the upstart Capitals.

A week after bringing in Williams, Schmidt picked up Bill Lesuk from the Los Angeles Kings. A gritty, hard-working checking forward, Lesuk was developed in the Boston system, but his path to the NHL was blocked by the great depth in Boston at the time. After one season with the Caps, Lesuk left for Winnipeg of the WHA, where he was a vital cog on a team that won three AVCO World Trophies in a four-year span.



Yvon Labre, left

Exactly two months after Richard Nixon left DC for the final time, the Caps played their first regular season game in New York against the Rangers. The Caps lost by a 6-3 count, the first of 67 setbacks they would suffer in that 80-game season. Jim Hrycuik scored the first goal in Washington history, assisted by Joly and Denis Dupere. Hrycuik's Capitals and NHL career would last just 21 games; he would total five goals. After another shutout loss in Minnesota—the first of a team record 12 whitewashes that year—the Caps returned home.

On October 15, 1974, the Capitals made their Capital Centre debut against the Los Angeles Kings before a crowd of more than 15,000. A fired-up Caps team picked up its first point that night, skating to a 1-1 deadlock. Labre scored the first Capital goal at home, assisted by Dave Kryskow and Lesuk.

Just two nights later, Washington gained its first NHL victory, defeating the Original Six Chicago Blackhawks by a 4-3 count. Jack Egers supplied the game-winning goal for the Caps.

Six days after that, The Caps traveled to Chicago for a rematch. Though they came out on the short end of a 3-2 score, it was a memorable contest. Caps netminder Michel Belhumeur stopped not one, but two penalty shots. And he stymied a pair of proven scorers—Jim Pappin and future Hall of Famer Stan Mikita. It was the highlight of Belhumeur's hard luck career with Washington. In 42 games with the Caps, Belhumeur failed to notch a victory, going 0-29-4.

A 10-game losing streak followed the Caps first win. They would go more than a month before claiming a second victory.

"We went into every game looking to win, and I guess it was the hype and the adrenaline," says Labre of the team's relatively swift start that season. "But as reality set in, we just didn't play that well together."

Caps defenseman Bill Mikkelsen was in an unenviable position. Two years earlier, he had been a member of the original New York Islanders, who posted a 12-60-6 record, worst in modern NHL history at the time. The 1974-75 Capitals shattered that dubious mark.

"They were both long years," sighs Mikkelsen. "Those clubs were both comprised mostly of good AHL players, but it was tough for us to compete in the NHL."

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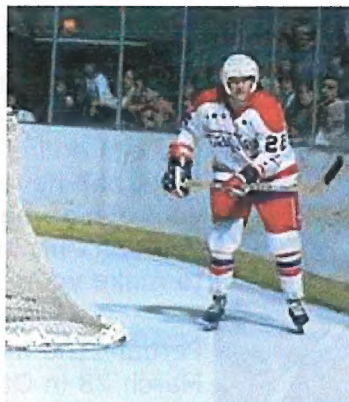
"There were so many powerhouses back then," he continues. "Like Boston, Montreal and Philadelphia. When you went into those buildings, it was almost like facing an all-star team. Clubs like that looked at us, and it was like a night off. They'd use us to pad their bonuses."

Lalonde also had an interesting perspective. He began that season in a Pittsburgh Penguins uniform.

"We had played in Washington a couple of weeks before the trade," says Lalonde. "I remember sitting on the Pittsburgh bench—we beat them 8-1 that day. And Yvon Labre, who had been in the Pittsburgh organization before going over in the expansion draft; I can remember thinking, 'Boy, I feel sorry for him. It's going to be a long year.' Two weeks later, I'm on the [Capitals] bench with Yvon."

Lalonde came to Washington from the Pens on December 14 in exchange for Lew Morrison. The deal proved to be a good one for Washington as Lalonde became a valuable role player for the next four years.

The losses piled up, and coach Jimmy Anderson was replaced by Red Sullivan on February 11. Anderson compiled a 4-45-5 record as the team's bench boss. Sullivan lasted little more than a month, going 2-17-0 before Schmidt himself took the reins.



Ron Lalonde

The defeats weighed heavily on the entire team, especially beleaguered goaltender Ronnie Low (now the head coach of the Edmonton Oilers) and highly touted youngsters Joly and Marson.

"Losing affects people in different ways," says Lesuk, who is now Director of Scouting for the Phoenix Coyotes. "It was tearing Ronnie's heart out. Tears were coming down his cheeks."

Lalonde remains impressed by how Low fought his way through the long season. "Ronnie faced so many shots but he never gave up," Lalonde recalls. "If we were losing 6-1, he wasn't going to give up that seventh goal, and he practiced that way, too. You build from that, and not everybody has that attitude."

Despite their obvious travails, Joly and Marson also held up as well as could be expected.

"Mike Marson and Greg Joly really had some tough times," says Lesuk. "Greg was picked first and put a lot of pressure on himself. He ended up playing quite a bit and I think he had a broken bone in his hand. He was hurting pretty bad. But he kept grinding it out."

But Joly doesn't think it was any tougher on him than anyone else. "I think that goes with the territory," he says of the pressure of being the first overall pick. "I think even now they expect top picks to carry their share of the load, and in my case, I just didn't play very well."

Marson correctly points out that top picks on established clubs were able to learn by watching and developing. "Going to an expansion team, you had to perform," he states. "I remember Mario Tremblay went to Montreal and just sat on the bench for the first few years, learning the game from the likes of [Yvon] Cournoyer, [Henri] Richard, [Serge] Savard and [Guy] Lapointe. The Canadiens and teams like that were strong enough to develop their players. So there was quite a bit of pressure on Joly and myself for us to come in and do in the pros the things we had done so well in juniors. It's quite a change because you're playing against men."

Marson also carried the additional burden of being the only black player in the NHL, and he conducted himself with a maturity and dignity beyond his years in the face of some harsh treatment around the league.



Tommy Williams

"Wherever I went, people were looking to see what I would do, how I would perform, whether I was tough enough to fight or what I would do when I was taunted," Marson says. "You do your best, the best you can do in dealing with situations that, in many cases, had never been dealt with before. Often times you're in an environment where you can feel that you don't fit, but realize that you have to find a way to make yourself fit."

Perhaps the high point of the long season came on March 28 in Oakland. The Caps had played 37 road games to that point, going 0-37-0. But a pair of third period goals by Nelson Pyatt saved the team from the ignominy of a winless season on the road. The Caps beat the white-skated Golden Seals, 5-3.

After the game, the relieved Caps reveled in the glory of their lone road triumph. "Tommy Williams got a hold of this trash can and had a few guys sign it and we started parading it around the room," laughs Labre. "It was as if we'd won the Stanley Cup. That was a fun time for us—there weren't that many."

"The stadium was pretty well empty," remembers Lalonde. "And here we are, skating around with this green garbage can. We all signed it, and it was there for years after that. It's probably still there."

Nearly 25 years later, what these men remember most is not the futility, but the fellowship, the fans and the feeling of being in on the ground floor of something new and exciting.

"I feel fortunate having been here for seven of those first years, even though they were not the greatest years," says Labre. To a man, Labre's former mates are effusive in their praise and admiration of him and his current role as Washington's ambassador of hockey.

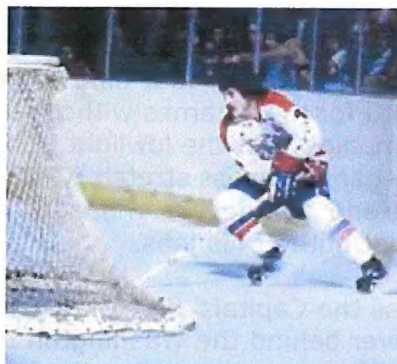
"All I can say is that Yvon Labre is a wonderful guy," exudes Schmidt. "When I had Yvon, there wasn't any doubt that he was giving me his all, regardless of what was happening; good, bad or otherwise. He's always been in the back of my mind, and the fact that he's still there with the Caps is great. They couldn't have picked a better guy for the good of the game and the good of the franchise."

As a teenager among men, Marson took pleasure in life on the road, where he roomed with Labre. Teammates quickly dubbed them, "Chico and the Man."

"The west coast swings were probably our best times as a team, socially, because we were away from the pressures of home," remembers Marson. "I have fond memories of getting to know some of the guys on a more personal note. At that time, the west coast swings were 14 days long. You really get a chance to know or find out who these guys are as teammates."

"I look back on that year fondly," says Mikkelsen. "We didn't lose for lack of trying, and it was a great bunch of guys."

"Just being a part of something new and coming to Washington, that was the best memory I had," Lesuk recalls of that first year. "I can look back and I can say that I really appreciated the time that I had there. In many ways, it was just too short. I'd like to say a big thank you to Mr. Pollin and to the entire Washington Capitals organization."



Bill Mikkelsen

The original Caps were happy to see their successors skating in the Stanley Cup Finals last spring. "It was nice to finally see them reach that level," says Lalonde. "The Washington fans certainly deserved it. I took a little pride. The Capitals still hold a little piece of my heart."

Schmidt, now 80 years old and enjoying his retirement at his suburban Boston home, is also pleased with the franchise's progress. "I will honestly say that I'm very pleased with that franchise for Abe's sake," he says of his former employer. "He's stuck with it through thick and thin, he's a great man and I enjoyed working for him the short time that I did."

With hockey fervor at a fever pitch in DC after the team's trip to the Cup Finals last spring, it's time to doff the helmet and salute these men who toiled through trying times during the franchise's lean years. Once they were warriors of the ice; now they too are fans of the current Capitals who carry the puck into the club's second quarter-century.



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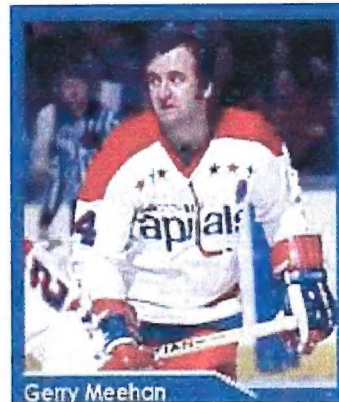
Sophomore Slump? Not Possible

A look back at the Capitals' 1975-76 season

It would have been virtually impossible for the 1975-76 Washington Capitals to suffer from a sophomore slump. In their inaugural season, the Caps set NHL records for fewest wins (eight), fewest points (21), most losses (67) and most road losses (39). But second year improvements were few and minimal.

The '75-76 bunch won 11 games and accumulated 32 points. Five of the team's 11 wins came on the road. But the Caps failed to win consecutive games for the second straight season. The offense picked up a bit - Washington scored 43 more goals than it had in its maiden season, an increase of 24% -- but the Capitals again allowed the most goals in the league, 394.

Washington also set a pair of dubious records that it hopes will stand for all time in the franchise annals. The Caps were winless in their first nine contests (0-8-1), a club record for most games without a win at the start of a campaign. But the lowlight of the entire season was a 25-game winless stretch (0-22-3) that spanned 57 days and cost general manager/head coach Milt Schmidt both of his jobs.



Schmidt, who was the Capitals' first-ever general manager, took over behind the Washington bench late in the 1974-75 season, becoming the team's third head coach in the process. He held both roles as the second season got underway but was relieved of both posts on December 29, 1975. The Capitals were 3-28-5 at the time and were in the midst of their long winless streak. Schmidt got his walking papers after a 6-0 home ice loss to the Montreal Canadiens.

Max McNab left his post as the president of the Central Hockey League to take over as Washington's general manager. McNab hired Tommy McVie to take over as the team's head coach. McNab and McVie became the braintrust of a team that had won only 11 of its first 116 games in the league. McVie was a taskmaster who demanded much of his players and worked them hard at practice. However, there was still a significant dearth of hockey talent on the Washington roster, a situation that would not be rectified for several years.

Over the summer between the first two seasons, Schmidt made a deal with the Philadelphia Flyers that he hoped would elevate Washington's talent level. Schmidt agreed to send the first overall pick in the 1975 NHL Entry Draft to the Flyers in exchange for Philly's top pick (the 18th overall pick and the final choice in the first round). Besides the swap of picks, the Capitals received forwards Bill Clement and Don McLean from the Flyers. Clement took over the team's captaincy from the retired Doug Mohns. McLean's career as a Capital lasted all of nine games. The Flyers took Mel Bridgman with the pick obtained from Washington; he went on to score 252 goals and 701 points in a 977-game NHL career.

Clement also proved to be a short-timer in Washington. Barely halfway through

the season, he was dealt to Atlanta in exchange for forwards Gerry Meehan and Jean Lemieux and a first round draft pick. The deal was McNab's first as the Caps' GM.

There was a modicum of improvement after the GM and coaching changes in late December. At the time of the housecleaning, the Caps were on pace to duplicate their dismal 21-point performance of 1974-75. The Caps managed to pick up 21 points over the season's second half and finished with 32, a modest increase over the ineptitude of the first year.

Washington's opening night game for the 1975-76 season drew a paltry crowd of 9,375 spectators. The Caps fell to Pittsburgh, 4-2, but there were minor signs of hope in the contest. Defenseman Greg Joly - Washington's first pick in the 1974 Entry Draft scored the team's first goal of the season. Rookie Tony White, the 161st player taken in the 1974 draft, scored his first NHL goal to account for the other Washington tally.



Two games later, the Caps traveled to Pittsburgh for a rematch with the Penguins. The Pens came out on top 7-5, but four different Capitals scored on the power play. The Caps' extra-man unit was one of the few highlights of the early part of the season. The Caps scored seven of their first 13 goals with the man advantage in '75-76.

On October 26, the Capitals traveled to Chicago, bringing with them the weight of an 0-8-1 start. Just as they did in their first season of existence, the Capitals defeated the Blackhawks for their first win of the '75-76 season. Chicago scored twice in the first to

take a 2-0 lead, but the Caps bounced back with four in the second.

Washington entered the final frame with a 4-3 lead and goaltender Ron Low stopped 21 of 23 third period shots to pace the Caps to a 7-5 victory. Chicago outshot the Caps 53-24 but the Capitals still managed to hang a loss on future Hall of Fame netminder Tony Esposito.

For most of the Caps' history up to this point, Ron Low and Michel Belhumeur had split the team's netminding duties. On October 30, Bernie Wolfe made his NHL debut between the pipes for Washington and he became the first Caps goaltender to win his NHL debut. Wolfe and his mates beat the Kansas City Scouts, 6-2. Tommy Williams - the team's leading scorer in its first season - notched his second two-goal game of the campaign.

It would be nearly a month before Washington would taste victory again. On November 26, the Caps trounced Los Angeles 7-2, the biggest winning margin in franchise history at the time. The Caps tied a team mark with two shorthanded goals (Joly and Ron Lalonde) in a game and White's goal at the 20-second mark of the first set a team record for fastest goal at the start of a game. Thirty-six seconds later, Stan Gilbertson made it 2-0 and the Caps were on their way to a rare laugh.

Gilbertson featured one of Washington's hottest sticks in the early going. He scored his 10th goal of the season on November 12 in the team's 16th game. Gilbertson's goal came against the Penguins, the same team he scored four goals in a single game against late in the 1974-75 season. The Penguins were

paying attention; on December 16 they sent center Harvey Bennett to the Capitals in exchange for Gilbertson.

The deal made sense for Washington. Gilbertson was a 31-year-old winger in the midst of a career season while Bennett was a big (6-foot-4, 215-pound), young (23) pivot with promise. It was the last trade made by Schmidt before he was relieved of his duties.

No one knew the drought that lay ahead after that win over the Kings in late November. The Caps dropped a 5-3 decision to Minnesota three nights later, beginning a two-month tailspin that led to Schmidt's ouster. It would be 25 games and 57 days before the Caps would win another contest. Washington went 0-22-3 over the course of its winless string. Five of the losses were shutouts and the Caps were outscored by a total of 140-58 over the duration of the streak. In 17 of the 25 games, the Capitals allowed more than four goals; Washington scored more than four just twice.

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On December 6, Montreal drubbed the Caps, 9-3. Yvon Cournoyer had a hat trick and six points; Steve Shutt had five points. The Caps were outshot 54-13 including 23-1 in the third period.

On December 21, Washington absorbed a 14-2 beating in Buffalo, a thumping that stands to this day as the worst in team history. The Caps were outshot 50-16 and Buffalo scored eight goals on 22 third period shots. Cap killer Richard Martin scored four goals and Freddie Stanfield had a hat trick. Only three of the 17 Buffalo skaters dressed for the game failed to register a point.



Just three days after the Buffalo massacre, Williams announced his retirement from the NHL. The game was no longer fun for the fun-loving "Tom the Bomb." He had scored eight goals and 21 points in 34 games but was pointless in seven straight games and was also a minus-33. A widower with young children at home, the 35-year-old Williams closed the book on a solid 13-year career in which he was the most prominent American-born player in the league.

The Caps returned to the ice without their incumbent leading scorer and skated to a 1-1 tie against Minnesota on December 26. The Canadiens came calling to the Capital Centre on December 29. The Caps outshot the Habs 12-9 in the first and were in a scoreless tie when they skated to the locker room at intermission. But the Habs of that era were an explosive bunch. They outshot the Caps 33-15 and outscored them the rest of the way. After the game, Schmidt was informed that he was being replaced.

Two days later, the McNab/McVie era began with similar results. Detroit blanked the Caps, 4-0. The Caps erupted for five goals against The California Golden Seals on January 2, but the Seals set a club record with 51 shots on goal. Powered by Wayne Merrick's hat trick, they beat the Caps, 8-5. Washington then traveled to Montreal where it suffered a 7-0 shutout - its third in four games - at the hands of the Habs.

On January 8, Washington suffered the 100th loss of its existence but did not incur a minor penalty for the first time in its existence. The Caps lone penalty was a five-minute fighting major to Bob Paradise who took on the Blues' Derek Sanderson.

Three nights later, Washington fell to the Bruins by a 7-4 count to run its winless streak to 21 games, tying the NHL record. Johnny Bucyk's hat trick paced Boston. All 11 goals were scored at even strength.

The Caps traveled to Montreal on January 13, hoping against hope for a win that would prevent them from securing full possession of such a dubious record. The Caps fought gamely, but managed only 13 shots in a 3-2 loss. The streak was at 22 and the Caps were in the record books.

The streak reached 25 on January 21 in a 5-2 home ice loss to the Islanders.

Only 6565 brave souls showed up at the Capital Centre for that one. A day later, McNab sent Clement to Atlanta for Lemieux and Meehan. With two new players in their lineup, the Caps prepared for a tilt with the Rangers.

The Caps jumped out to a 3-0 lead and Lemieux got it started with a goal on his first shot as a Capital. Unable to stand the prosperity, the Capitals proceeded to give up four unanswered goals in falling behind, 4-3. But the Caps didn't quit. Bob Sirois, White and Ace Bailey scored within a span of 5:52 in the third period to lift Washington to a 6-4 lead. The Caps hung on for a 7-5 win, McVie's first as an NHL head coach. The win lifted the Caps' season record to 4-39-5.

There were some small victories from that point until the end of the season. Nelson Pyatt scored his 20th goal on February 4 in a 4-4 tie with the Maple Leafs. On February 15, the Caps thumped Detroit 8-5 and scored a club record five goals in the third period. Lemieux and Meehan each scored twice in that contest. In the third, Lemieux and Pyatt scored within eight seconds of one another to establish a team standard for the fastest two goals. Pyatt's goal was his 22nd, tying Williams' mark from the inaugural season.



White victimized the Wings for his second hat trick of the season on February 21 and reached the 20-goal plateau in the process.

Despite being outshot 41-19, the Caps gained their first-ever point against Philadelphia in a 5-5 tie before a sellout crowd at the Cap Centre on February 24. The Caps followed that up with a 3-3 home ice tie against Boston. Washington erased a 3-0 Bruins lead to salvage a point in that one. It marked the first time all season that Washington had earned a point in consecutive games. With a 4-1 win over Chicago on February 29, the Caps had a three-game unbeaten streak for the first time in their history.

Washington scored three third period goals to turn a 5-2 deficit into a 5-5 tie against Kansas City on March 23. Despite being outshot 52-27, the Caps edged the Penguins 5-4 on April 3. It was Washington's fifth road win of the season.

There were also more downtrodden times, too. A February 7 loss to Kansas City ended the Scouts' 16-game winless streak. The Rangers battered the Caps 11-4 on February 18. New York's Steve Vickers had a career night with a hat trick and seven points. Philadelphia pummeled the Caps 11-2 at the Spectrum on April 1. Bill Barber had a hat trick for the Flyers, who outshot the Caps by a 62-22 margin.

The season mercifully came to an end on April 4. The Caps hosted the Canadiens in front of a sellout crowd and put on a good show against the league's heavyweight team. The Caps were outshot 39-24 but actually held a 3-2 lead late in the third period. Yvon Lambert tied it for the Habs with only 2:17 remaining and Guy Lafleur scored the game-winner just 24 seconds later.

The Caps finished up at 11-59-10, good for 32 points. Washington wound up 95 points behind division-leading Montreal, which lost only 11 games and piled up 127 points.

The Capitals had just endured two years of almost total futility. Worse, they had no star players and it was becoming apparent that the highly touted draft picks from the previous season - Greg Joly and Mike Marson - were not going to develop into stars.

Respectability was still years away but the Capitals needed a star, and they would get one before opening night of the 1976-77 season.

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Doubling Up

A look back at the Capitals' 1976-77 season

As the Washington Capitals were preparing for the third training camp of their brief history in the late summer of 1976, the team's fortunes took a sudden upward turn. On September 1, 1976, the Capitals announced that they had signed free agent forward Guy Charron away from the Colorado Rockies.

After two years as the Kansas City Scouts, the Rockies were about to continue their existence in Denver and the team chose not to expend its financial resources on Charron, who was coming off a 27-goal season. The 27-year-old Quebec native was just what Washington needed - a goal scorer who could electrify the Capitals' growing fan base and who could alter the course of a game with his speed and skill.

As compensation for signing Charron, the Caps sent the rights to Nelson Pyatt - their own leading scorer from the previous season - to Colorado.

Charron made his presence felt immediately. Washington won its season opener in 1976, a 6-5 barnburner over the Atlanta Flames. It was the first time the Caps opened the season with a win and as such, the first time they had ever been above the .500 mark. Charron scored a goal and assisted on Hartland Monahan's game-winner. Charron had a goal and an assist in the Caps' second game, too - a 3-3 tie in Detroit. He continued his scoring streak in a 6-3 loss to the Barons in Cleveland.

The "fast" start proved to be a mirage - the Caps went through a six-game winless skid and fell to 1-5-2. Charron continued to score consistently - he potted eight of the team's first 28 goals.



Guy Charron is pinned to the boards by this future Hall of Famer, Bobby Orr.

After a 3-2 setback against the Sabres on November 5, the Caps embarked upon the first winning streak in franchise history. They beat the North Stars 4-1 on November 7 and downed the Canucks 4-2 two nights later. Charron scored in the Vancouver game, his 10th tally in 14 contests. It took 174 games, but Washington had the first set of back-to-back wins in its history. For good measure, the Caps made it three straight with a 7-5 win over the Rangers in New York on November 10. In the three-game streak, Charron scored three goals and seven points.

In a 5-4 loss to Chicago on November 12, Charron tied club records with a goal in four straight games. He and Jack Lynch also tied the club standard with assists in four straight games.

Besides Charron, there was one other significant addition to the Capitals' lineup for the '76-77 season. Washington used its first pick in the 1976 NHL Entry Draft - the first overall pick in the draft - to select defenseman Rick Green. Green was a big, rugged defenseman who played his junior hockey for the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League and won the Max Kamensky

Trophy as the league's outstanding defenseman. Green cracked the Capitals' lineup as a 20-year-old rookie. He scored his first NHL goal on November 21 in a 3-1 Washington win over the Colorado Rockies.

On November 30, the Caps gave up on another of their bright young blueline prospects. Washington GM Max McNab sent defenseman Greg Joly to Detroit in exchange for veteran rearguard Bryan "Bugsy" Watson. Joly, the first overall pick in the 1974 draft, hadn't developed as well or as swiftly as the Capitals had hoped. He opened the 1976-77 season in the minors before being swapped to the Wings. Joly was only 22 at the time of the deal, but injuries and ineffectiveness hampered his career. He was out of the NHL for good before his 30th birthday.

Watson was a 14-year veteran who had a wealth of experience with both good and bad teams. He was a feisty, pesky player who played much bigger than his size (5-foot-9, 175 pounds) and he was a strong locker room personality. Watson debuted with the Caps against the Rangers on December 1.



Ace Bailey

Two nights after Watson's arrival, the Caps hosted the Philadelphia Flyers. A big crowd of 17,626 was on hand and they witnessed a first in Caps history. The game was a seesaw affair; the Flyers grabbed a 2-0 lead before Washington tied it up. Philly went back in front 3-2, the Caps again knotted the score. When Reggie Leach put the Flyers up 4-3 with just 3:45 remaining, Washington's prospects of getting the equalizer past future Hall of Famer Bernie Parent seemed bleak. Caps bench boss Tom McVie pulled goaltender Bernie Wolfe for an extra skater late in the game and for the first time in franchise history, the ploy paid dividends. Hartland Monahan beat Parent with just 30 seconds remaining to give the Caps a 4-4 tie with their

neighbors from the north.

Two nights later, the Caps traveled to Boston and repeated the feat. The Caps squandered a 3-0 first period lead and a 4-3 third period lead. Washington's second goal was scored by Tom Rowe, the club's third pick (37th overall) in the 1976 Entry Draft. It was Rowe's first NHL goal and it came on his first NHL shot. With Ron Low off for an extra skater, Charron beat another future Hall of Fame netminder - this time it was Gerry Cheevers - to give the Caps a 5-5 tie with the Bruins.

On December 4, the Caps acquired veteran forward Bill Collins from Philadelphia for cash. The well-traveled Collins had once been traded for Watson and was now joining him in Washington.

The Caps returned home to take on the Canucks on December 7. Charron scored a goal in his fourth consecutive game to match his own club record, and the Caps beat Vancouver, 4-3. In the process, Washington matched club records with a three-game unbeaten streak and a four-game unbeaten streak at home.

Charron netted a pair of goals in a loss to Cleveland on December 11, reaching

the 20-goal mark in the team's 29th game of the season. On December 14, Watson and Collins both recorded their first points as Capitals when they assisted on a goal by Rick Bagnalo. On December 17, Watson was assessed a holding minor that put him at 2,000 career penalty minutes. He was the first player in NHL history to achieve that plateau.

[CONTINUE](#) 

Doubling Up

A look back at the Capitals' 1976-77 season

On January 10, the Capitals recorded just the second shutout of their history, a 2-0 win over the Red Wings in Detroit. Collins scored the game-winner against his former team -a shorthanded goal at the 2:38 mark of the first period. Caps netminder Bernie Wolfe notched his first NHL shutout. The win was Washington's 12th of the season and it established a new club standard.

With a 4-2 win over Buffalo on January 19, the Capitals reached the 33-point mark to eclipse their total from the previous campaign. The win was also Washington's first ever over the Sabres.

The Capitals started the best stretch of their short history with a 6-3 home ice win over the St. Louis Blues on January 23. The Caps fell behind 3-2 but tied the game on Bill Riley's goal with just 3:18 remaining in the game. With only 1:08 left, Hartland Monahan netted the game-winner for Washington. Ace Bailey scored for the Caps 32 seconds later and Gerry Meehan added an empty-netter 11 seconds after Bailey's strike. Washington set club standards with three goals in 43 seconds and four goals in 2:53.



Gord Lane

On January 27, the Caps downed Detroit by a 4-1 score. Washington then traveled to St. Louis where it beat the Blues by a 5-2 count on January 29. The three-game winning streak matched the club mark set earlier in the season. Charron reached the 25-goal and 50-point plateaus in the game.

The Caps returned home to take on the Flyers on January 30. In front of a sellout crowd, Washington skated to a 5-5 deadlock with Philadelphia. The tie extended the Caps' unbeaten streak to four straight, a new club record. Bryan

Watson's goal at the 15-second mark of the third period was his first as a Capital and the 14th of his 14-year NHL career. Watson's tally gave the Caps a short-lived 4-3 lead. Washington had a 5-4 advantage until Rick MacLeish's power play goal tied it with 3:36 left.

A 7-2 loss in LA ended the Caps' unbeaten streak at four. Charron set a new club mark when he scored his 27th goal in a 3-3 tie with the Islanders on February 5.

After a 4-4 tie in Chicago on February 9, the Capitals stood at 16-30-10, a marked improvement over their performance in their first two seasons. But the next two games would see the Caps revert to their inept expansion form.

In the fifth of a six-game road trip, the Caps absorbed a 9-2 beating at Philadelphia on February 10. It was the most goals the Caps had allowed all season, the worst defeat they had suffered and the most shots they had allowed all year (46), too.

Two nights later in Toronto, the Caps set new marks again for most goals

allowed in a game and worst beating of the campaign in a 10-0 loss to the Maple Leafs. Lanny McDonald and Darryl Sittler each scored twice and Inge Hammarstrom had a goal and five points for the Leafs. With the loss, the Caps matched their longest winless skid (seven games) of the season.

The Caps returned home and skated to a 3-3 tie against the North Stars on February 15. Charron became the first Capital to enjoy a 30-goal season and set a club mark by registering his 59th point of the season. Tommy Williams had set the previous mark with 58 points in the team's inaugural season of 1974-75.

Monahan scored his 20th goal of the season in a 2-2 tie against the Islanders on February 20.

With a 3-1 win over the Penguins at the Capital Centre on February 22, the Capitals snapped an 11-game winless streak (0-5-6) behind a pair of goals by Gerry Meehan. Three days later, Meehan scored his 20th of the season in a 4-2 win over Toronto. He joined Charron and Monahan as 20-goal getters, giving the Caps three 20-goal scorers for the first time in club history.

On March 3, the Caps acquired veteran goaltender Roger Crozier from the Buffalo Sabres in a cash deal. Crozier got the start against his former Detroit teammates on March 13 but played only the first two periods in a 3-3 tie. Crozier got the nod in net against Colorado on March 18 but again left after two periods. Ron Low relieved Crozier and the two combined to author the third shutout in team history, a 5-0 whitewash of the Rockies. The victory was Washington's 20th, exceeding its combined total for its first two seasons.

The Capitals hosted the Sabres on March 20 and fell, 6-2. After the Caps grabbed a 1-0 lead on Meehan's shorthanded goal, Buffalo scored twice within eight seconds - the fastest two goals ever against the Caps - to take a 2-1 lead. Yvon Labre earned an ejection with three majors, a game misconduct and a club record 29 minutes in penalties in a single game. Labre and Buffalo's Danny Gare twice went at it, earning fighting majors in the process. Labre was also assessed a major for spearing.

Washington thumped the Rangers 7-2 on March 25. For the third time, Crozier was unable to finish a game that he started. Three minutes into the second period, he suffered face lacerations when he was struck on the mask by a shot off the stick of New York's Phil Esposito. It would be Crozier's last game in the NHL. The 35-year-old netminder - long plagued by pancreatitis - chose to retire at the end of the season. Bernie Wolfe relieved Crozier and the Caps made a winner of him by scoring five second period goals against New York's John Davidson. The five goals came in a span of just 9:49, making them the fastest five goals in franchise history.

The Caps hosted Toronto on March 27 and the fireworks started early. The Maple Leafs' Tiger Williams and the Caps' Bill Riley went toe-to-toe just 11

The Caps hosted Toronto on March 27 and the fireworks started early. The Maple Leafs' Tiger Williams and the Caps' Bill Riley went toe-to-toe just 11 seconds into the game. Both received fighting majors; Williams was also slapped with a gross misconduct for "conduct unbecoming of a hockey player."

seconds into the game. Both received fighting majors; Williams was also slapped with a gross misconduct for "conduct unbecoming of a hockey player." Toronto took a 1-0 lead but a fired-up Riley came out of the penalty box and scored a pair of power play goals in less than two minutes of time. The game was marred by a slew of roughing, slashing and cross-checking calls. Washington took a 6-2 lead on three second period goals and Meehan's tally early in the third. Riley and Toronto's Brian Glennie mixed it up and this time it was Riley who received the gross misconduct for pulling Glennie's hair. Since it was Riley's third game misconduct of the season, he drew an automatic suspension for the Caps' next game. Washington held on to beat the Leafs, 7-4. The win was the Caps' 22nd of the season, doubling their output from the 1975-76 campaign.



Bill Riley

Without Riley in the lineup, Washington thumped the Red Wings 6-1. The Caps extended their club record with their 10th shorthanded goal of the season. For the third time in the season, Washington had a three-game winning streak. The Caps stretched it to four wins in a row - a new club mark - with a 4-3 win in Pittsburgh on March 30.

There were only two games remaining in the season, a home-and-home set against the Montreal Canadiens. In Montreal on April 2, the Caps were reminded of just how far they had to go to be able to compete with the elite teams of the NHL. Nine different Canadiens combined to dent the Washington nets 11 times in an 11-0 Montreal triumph. The Caps regained a measure of respect in Landover the next night when they limited the high-flying Habs to just

two goals in a 2-1 loss. Steve Shutt scored his 60th of the season for Montreal, which went 60-8-12 and accumulated 132 points on the season.

As for the Capitals, their season also had to be considered a success. The Caps finished at 24-42-14 for 62 points, nearly double their previous best of 32 points. Washington finished fourth in the Norris Division standings, escaping the basement for the first time (Detroit occupied that spot). The Caps also shaved 87 goals against off their 1975-76 total, an improvement of more than a goal a game.

With three 20-goal scorers and 10 double-digit goal scorers, the Caps also had shown offensive improvement. There were many reasons to be hopeful as the team prepared for Year Four.



PREVIOUS

Slippery Slope

The Washington Capitals' 1977-78 season...

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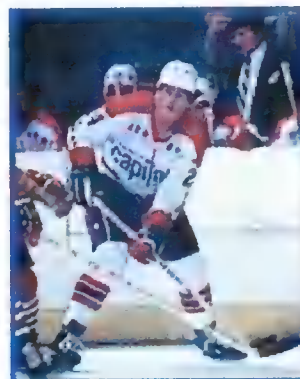
In the summer leading up to the fourth season of the Capitals' history, general manager Max McNab consummated one significant deal. On August 17, 1977, McNab sent beleaguered goaltender Ron Low and a draft pick to Detroit for center Walt McKechnie and a pair of draft picks. McKechnie was coming off the best two seasons of his NHL career, an 82-point campaign in 1975-76 and a 59-point effort in 1976-77. A few weeks after the deal, McNab signed veteran goaltender Gary "Suitcase" Smith to share the netminding chores with Bernie Wolfe.

Wolfe got the nod in the nets on Opening Night, October 14. Pittsburgh supplied the opposition and the largest opening game crowd - 16,712 - in Washington's brief NHL history watched as the Caps edged the Pens, 2-1. Bob Sirois and Guy Charron supplied the Washington offense and Wolfe stopped 23 of 24 shots.

Defenseman Robert Picard - Washington's first round selection (third overall) in the 1977 NHL Entry Draft made his NHL debut for Washington in Montreal on October 24. The Caps fell by a 5-1 score and Picard's only contribution to the scoresheet was a tripping minor in the first period.

He made much more of an impact in his second game, in Atlanta on October 26. The Caps thrashed the Flames 6-2 for their first win ever in Atlanta. Picard picked up three assists, tying club records for assists in a game by a defenseman and by a rookie. Bob Sirois scored his fifth goal in five games and Gary Smith won his first game as a Capital. The victory pushed the Caps' record to 2-3-0 but it would be a long time before Washington would notch its third triumph.

The October 29 contest against the North Stars in Minnesota was a wild one. The Stars scored seven unanswered goals to take a 7-0 lead by the middle of the third period. The Stars took a series of penalties shortly thereafter and the Caps took advantage. Walt McKechnie's power play goal ended Pete LoPresti's shutout bid with just 3:15 remaining, but the Caps were far from finished. With Washington holding a four-on-three manpower advantage, Bob Sirois scored as did Guy Charron. With only 57 seconds left, Charron added another. After going 56:35 without scoring, the Caps tallied four times in just 2:28 to set a mark for the fastest four goals in franchise history.



Robert Picard

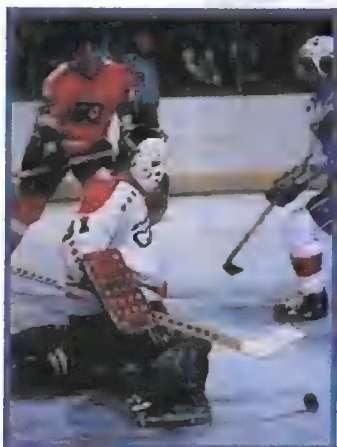
Nelson Burton - Washington's fourth pick (57th overall) in the 1977 Entry Draft - made his NHL debut when the Caps returned home to face Chicago on

November 2. Burton scored his first - and, as it turns out, his last - NHL goal on his first NHL shot against future Hall of Famer Tony Esposito to give the Caps a 1-0 lead. The Caps played the Hawks to a 2-2 tie.

The Caps skated to a 1-1 tie with the Red Wings in Detroit on November 9. Gerry Meehan's power play goal accounted for all of Washington's offense. The tally also gave Meehan 100 points in a Caps uniform. He became the first player in franchise history to reach the century mark.

On November 11 against Toronto, Mark Lofthouse became the third 1977 draftee to make his NHL debut for the Caps. Lofthouse scored his first NHL goal in St. Louis on November 15 when he beat the Blues' Eddie Johnston in a 2-2 tie.

In a 2-2 tie with the Atlanta Flames on November 23, the Capitals went without a penalty for the second consecutive game. The next night in Boston, Eddy Godin became the fourth member of the 1977 draft class to make his debut for the Caps during the 1977-78 campaign. Godin scored his first NHL goal on December 4 against Pittsburgh's Dunc Wilson. Godin also assisted on Craig Patrick's third period power play goal, Washington's first extra man tally in 44 attempts. The Penguins prevailed, 4-2. In the process, they extended Washington's winless streak to 19 straight.



Jim Bedard

On December 6, the winless streak reached 20 games (0-15-5) in front of a paltry gathering of 6,848 at the Capital Centre. The Capitals managed to score more than two goals in only three of those 20 games and were outscored by a total of 86-38. Washington ended the streak of futility by beating the Barons in Cleveland on December 7. The win raised the Capitals' record to 3-18-5.

Walt McKechnie - acquired from Detroit only months earlier in the Ron Low trade - was dealt to Cleveland for left wing Bob Girard and a second round draft pick. McKechnie's Capitals career spanned just 16 games; he totaled four goals and five points.

Guy Charron scored the lone Caps goal in a 5-1 loss to Atlanta on December 10. In doing so, he joined Gerry Meehan as the second Capital skater to amass 100 points in a Washington uniform.

One night later, the Caps were back in the win column with a 2-1 win over St. Louis. Girard's first goal as a Capital proved to be the game-winner and rookie netminder Jim Bedard picked up his first NHL win.

On December 17, Charron scored both goals in a 2-1 Caps win over the Kings in Los Angeles. Charron reached the 150-goal plateau for his NHL career in the process.

Four nights later, the Caps built a road unbeaten streak for the first time in their history when they skated to a 5-5 tie with the Rangers in New York. Washington fell behind 3-0 and then set a club road standard by ripping off five straight unanswered goals in the second period. Charron and Godin netted a pair apiece and Charron became the first Capital to score 50 goals with the

Slippery Slope

The Washington Capitals' 1977-78 season

The Caps returned home on December 23 and edged the Red Wings 3-2 despite being outshot by a 38-18 margin. Bob Sirois led the way offensively with a pair of goals and Bernie Wolfe made 36 saves.

After the holidays, the Caps dropped a 6-3 decision to the Bruins at home but then mounted a modest five-game unbeaten streak to establish a new club mark. The Caps tied the Penguins and Rangers then defeated the Penguins and Kings. The win over LA was a 4-0 whitewash and it gave Jim Bedard his first NHL shutout. When the Caps skated to a 4-4 tie with the Sabres at the Capital Centre on January 7, it gave the Caps a 2-0-3 mark in their last five.

Charron reached the 20-goal plateau for the second straight season when he tallied against his former Colorado teammates on January 25. The Caps managed a 3-3 tie against the Rockies that night but dropped the next six games in a row by a combined score of 31-9.

The Caps got back into the win column on February 10 with a 4-1 win over the Barons in Cleveland. Charron scored twice and Bedard made 27 stops to pace Washington to its 10th win of the campaign (10-33-11).



Bob Sirois

The Caps played in Philadelphia on February 12 and were held to a miniscule total of seven shots on goal, still a club mark. The Flyers launched 30 shots against the Caps and came away with a 4-1 win.

On February 14 against Vancouver, Bryan "Bugsy" Watson picked up nine minutes worth of penalties and surpassed the 2,100 career mark in that category. At the time, he was the NHL's all-time leading bad boy.

The Capitals claimed a 2-1 win over Minnesota at the Capital Centre on February 19. Bedard made 25 saves while Bob Girard and Robert Picard supplied the goals. Poetically, the three stars that night were Girard, Bedard and Picard, respectively. Earlier in the day, Washington sold goaltender Suitcase Smith to the Minnesota North Stars. The strong play of Bedard made Smith expendable.

On February 28, the Caps clubbed Colorado by a 7-4 score at the Capital Centre. After missing most of the season because of injuries, Yvon Labre returned to the Caps lineup for the first time since October 28. Ace Bailey had a huge night for the Capitals. He scored his 100th point in a Washington uniform; registered four points, a team high for the season and he notched the sixth hat trick in team history and the first in more than two calendar years.



Bailey had three assists in Washington's next game, a



Bryan Watson

3-3 tie against the Blues in St. Louis on March 4. With Washington trailing 3-2 late in the contest, McVie pulled Bedard in favor of an extra skater. The ploy paid off when Bailey set up Picard for the game-tying tally with only 28 seconds left on the clock.

On March 15, Bob Sirois joined Charron in the 20-goal club. Sirois beat Toronto's Gord McRae in a 5-2 loss to the Maple Leafs.

Washington pounded the Colorado Rockies by an 8-3 score at the Capital Centre on March 18. The game featured several noteworthy performances and milestones. The Caps jumped out to an 8-0 lead, the

largest advantage in team history. The total of eight goals matched the team record as did the five goals in the second period. Charron scored six points to match an individual mark for most points in a game. Charron also rang up the team's second hat trick in six games. Sirois had two goals and five points.

On March 24, the Caps suffered an 11-4 home ice beating at the hands of the New York Rangers. Bernie Wolfe started in goal for the Caps but was pulled after permitting six goals on just 11 shots. Bedard fared only marginally better, allowing five goals on 14 shots. Phil Esposito scored his 29th NHL hat trick to establish a new NHL record and Ron Duguay also had a hat trick for the Blueshirts. Buggy Watson picked up 29 PIM in the first period to tie Yvon Labre's club mark for most PIM in a single frame. Watson picked up 25 of his PIM when he squared off with Rangers' tough guy Nick Fotiu. Watson, Mike Marson and Gord Lane all received game misconducts as a direct result of that skirmish and Lane picked up a rare triple minor, too.

Washington came back from a 4-2 third period deficit to earn a 4-4 tie with Boston on March 28. Charron scored both third period goals for Washington, registering his second hat trick of the season in the process.

On April 1, the Islanders edged Washington 3-2 at Nassau Coliseum on Long Island. New York's Mike Bossy scored twice, becoming the first rookie in NHL history to score 50 goals in a season. Charron scored his 36th goal of the season, tying his own mark for most goals in a season by a Capital. Picard picked up an assist and set a new club mark for points by a defenseman (31) in the process.

The next night, the Caps skated to a 4-4 tie against the Canadiens at the Capital Centre and earned their first-ever point against the Habs. Picard set a team record for defensemen with his 10th goal of the season and Charron set a club mark with his 37th. Charron scored for the fourth consecutive game and had seven goals over that span.

The Caps beat Buffalo 4-3 in their next game and Tom Rowe became the fifth Capital to score in four straight games. Picard had three assists and was named the number one star.

The Caps traveled to Pittsburgh for their final road game of the season on April 8. Washington scored five unanswered goals to start the game, setting a club mark for most unanswered goals on the road in the process. The Caps were down four skaters to three when Buggy Watson scored the fourth of those five

goals. Watson's shorthanded strike was his third of the season and it matched his career best set in 1971-72 when he was a member of the Pittsburgh Penguins.

The Caps closed out the campaign on a high note with a 4-2 win over Atlanta on April 9. The win was Washington's third straight and it enabled the Caps to close the season with a four-game unbeaten streak. The Caps wound up the season by going 4-1-1 in their last six games to wind up at 17-49-14 on the season. Washington fell 14 points shy of its franchise best mark of 62 points, set in 1976-77.



PREVIOUS

Highwater Mark

A look back at the Capitals' 1978-79 season

by Mike Vogel

After four seasons in the NHL, the Washington Capitals were still light years away from contending for a playoff spot. Capitals general manager Max McNab set to improving his team in the summer leading up to the 1978-79 campaign and made some solid additions over a one-week span in June.

On June 10, Washington made its first foray into the European talent pool when it signed a pair of veteran pros from Sweden. The Caps inked 27-year-old center Rolf Edberg and 26-year-old defenseman Leif Svensson. Because the NHL was still competing with the rival World Hockey Association for available hockey talent, the European talent market was being tapped with more regularity by both North American major professional hockey leagues.

Five days after signing Edberg and Svensson, McNab went to Montreal to make the Capitals' selections in the annual NHL Entry Draft. It would be one of the most important drafts in franchise history. Washington had the second overall pick, three first-round selections, six of the top 45 picks, nine of the top 88 selections and 19 picks overall. McNab hoped to propel the Caps into contention for a playoff berth in 1978-79 with some inspired choices in the draft.

After the Minnesota North Stars selected Bobby Smith with the first overall pick, McNab opted for winger Ryan Walter. McNab took forwards Tim Coulis and Paul Mulvey with his other two first round choices. The selection of Walter proved to be a good one as did the third round selection (55th overall) of Bengt Gustafsson.

The Caps also made an attempt to bolster their defensive corps when they claimed blueliner Pierre Bouchard from Montreal in the waiver draft just prior to the start of the season. However, Bouchard elected to retire rather than go from the perennial Cup-winning Canadiens to the lowly Capitals.



Rolf Edberg

Just prior to the start of the season, the Caps made headlines with their surprising dismissal of head coach Tom McVie. McVie ran the club all throughout training camp and guided the Caps to their best preseason mark ever. Two days before the season started, McVie was fired and replaced by Danny Belisle. To this day, a reason has not been given for McVie's abrupt departure.

For the third straight season, the Capitals won their opening night contest. Washington opened the 1978-79 season in Los Angeles on October 11 with a 4-2 win over the Kings. Four different Caps scored and Jim Bedard made 29 saves to pave the way to the win.

Two nights later, the Caps were in Atlanta and came within 1:02 of a second straight win to open the season. But with Washington clinging to a one-goal lead late in the third period, the Flames pulled netminder Danny Bouchard for an extra skater.

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Former Caps captain Bill Clement came back to bite the hand that once fed him when he netted the equalizer at 18:58. Bedard made 32 stops and Bob Sirois scored a pair of goals (and assisted on the other) within 13 seconds - breaking his own club mark of two tallies in 17 seconds. Mulvey netted his first NHL goal with an assist from Edberg, who registered his first NHL point on the goal. Edberg also assisted on Sirois' second goal.

Atlanta spoiled Washington's home opener on October 14. The Flames prevailed 6-3 on Tom Lysiak's hat trick. Mulvey scored again for the Caps and Svensson picked up an assist for his first NHL point.

On October 18, the Caps fell to Chicago by a 4-2 count, dropping their record to 1-2-1. The caps were busy off the ice, too. McNab made what was - to that point - the biggest deal in club history when he swapped a first round draft pick to Minnesota in exchange for diminutive center Dennis Maruk, who had scored 36 goals for Cleveland in 1977-78.

Maruk made his Capitals debut in Landover on October 20 as the Caps hosted the Kings. Robert Picard scored twice for Washington and Maruk picked up an assist to notch his first point as a Capital. But Los Angeles won the game, 6-3.

After missing the first six games with a knee injury, Walter made his Washington debut against the Blackhawks in Chicago on October 25. After the Hawks opened up a 2-0 second period lead, Walter set up Tom Rowe to earn his first NHL point. Mulvey - playing against brother Grant's team - scored with 2:38 remaining in the second period to tie the game. That's how it ended and the deadlock put a stop to Washington's four-game losing streak.

On October 28, Walter scored his first NHL goal to account for all of Washington's offense in a 5-1 setback at Los Angeles.

The Capitals snapped a seven-game winless streak on November 1 with a 6-4 home ice win over Pittsburgh. Edberg scored his first NHL goal, Walter scored his first Capital Centre goal and Sirois scored his 50th goal as a Capital.

Walter picked up a goal and an assist the following night in a 4-2 loss at Montreal. The two-point night gave Walter three goals and six points in his first four NHL games.

On November 14, Washington won a barn-burner against the Flames at the Capital Centre, 8-7. The Caps led 3-0, 4-1 and 6-2 before Atlanta reeled off five straight goals to take a 7-6 lead midway through the third period. The two clubs were playing with just three skaters a side when Rick Green evened the score at 12:20. Rose scored with only 1:16 left on the clock to give the Caps the win. Svensson scored his first NHL goal, beating Danny Bouchard. The win raised the Capitals' record to 3-10-3.

The Caps then traveled to Minnesota for a date with the North Stars and won that one by a 3-2 score. After a home ice loss to the Islanders, Washington defeated the Blues in St. Louis, 4-3. It marked the first time in franchise history that the Capitals had won consecutive road games.

Goaltender Rollie Boutin made his NHL debut for Washington on December 2. Boutin relieved starter Bernie Wolfe, who had allowed four goals on 19 shots against the Blues in St. Louis. Boutin stopped all 14 St. Louis shots that he faced but the Blues scored an empty-netter and defeated the Caps, 5-2.

Boutin was pelted in his first start, however. He faced the Kings in LA on December 2 and was the victim of nine unanswered goals by nine different Kings after Bill Riley had given the Caps a 1-0 lead. The Caps



lost 10-2, plunging their record to 5-17-4.

On December 9, the Capitals finally won their first game in Canada with a 7-5 triumph over the Canucks in Vancouver. Mark Lofthouse led the way for Washington with his first NHL hat trick.

The Caps held on for a 7-6 win over Toronto in a display of firewagon hockey before only 5,894 patrons at the Capital Centre on December 17. Maruk scored his 100th career goal and it proved to be the game-winner.

Two days later, the Capitals signed former Penguins and Flyers netminder Gary Inness. Inness had been tending goal for the Indianapolis Racers of the WHA. The Racers dissolved shortly after trading Wayne Gretzky to Edmonton. The Caps threw Inness right into the fire that night, starting him against his former Philadelphia teammates. The Flyers outshot the Caps 39-19 but Inness's netminding enabled Washington to skate off with a 4-4 tie.

The Caps fell behind 5-3 in a December 30 game against the Leafs in Toronto, but Maruk's goal at 16:38 of the third pulled them within a goal. Belisle pulled Inness from the nets and Green's goal with 31 seconds remaining allowed the Caps to come away with a point.



Gary Inness

[CONTINUE](#) 

Highwater Mark

A look back at the Capitals' 1978-79 season
by Mike Vogel

Washington opened the New Year with an 8-3 drubbing of the Kings in Landover on January 3. Robert Picard set a club mark for points in a game by defenseman. He had a goal and three assists.

In Chicago on January 7, Picard picked up two assists to record at least a point in his ninth straight game, matching the club record set by Tommy Williams in 1974-75. Guy Charron played in his 200th game as a Capital - all consecutively - but the Caps fell, 5-3.

Picard erased Williams from the books when he scored a point in his 10th straight game on January 9 in a 5-2 loss against Philadelphia. Charron established a club mark with 13 shots on goal; he tallied one of the two Washington goals.

The Caps crushed Colorado 8-1 before a meager gathering of 5,458 at the Capital Centre on January 12. Washington set a club mark for largest margin of victory and also set a new club standard by scoring five goals in a span of 8:35. The previous mark of 9:49 was established on March 25, 1977. Dennis Maruk had a hat trick, Ryan Walter scored twice, and Gary Rissling netted his first NHL goal.



Ryan Walter

The Caps made it two straight with a 5-3 win over Vancouver on January 14. Five different Caps scored but Rissling's power play goal with 5:30 left in the third proved to be the game-winner.

On January 15, the Caps claimed veteran winger Greg Polis off waivers from the New York Rangers. He made his Capitals debut in a 6-2 loss against the Islanders in New York on January 16.

The Capitals drubbed Detroit by a 5-1 score on January 19. Picard scored his 11th goal of the season, breaking his own record for goals by a defenseman. Walter became the first Capital ever to score in five straight contests. A penalty-filled third period resulted in the assessment of 104 minutes in penance, setting a club mark for two teams.

The Caps thumped Pittsburgh on January 20, 5-2. Polis scored his first two goals as a Capital, victimizing the team with which he began his NHL career in 1970-71. Charron also scored a pair of goals including the game-winner.

A 5-1 win over the Rangers on January 24 was the Caps' third straight triumph and their fifth in their last six games. The win was Washington's fourth straight at home, establishing a new franchise record. Charron had two assists and became the first player to total 200 points as a Capital in the process. Picard scored a pair of goals and broke his own club record for defensemen with his 38th point.

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With a 4-1 win over Chicago on January 27, the Caps made it four straight and six of seven. Walter scored the 20th goal of his rookie season and Picard tied his own record for assists in a season by a defenseman. The Caps scored a power play goal in their seventh straight game to tie the team mark and tied another club record by scoring at least one goal in their 34th straight game.

Charron scored on the power play in a 2-2 tie with Toronto on January 28 to give the Caps a power play goal in eight straight games, a new team record.

On January 31, Walter took over the rookie goal scoring lead with his 22nd of the season. The Caps beat Los Angeles 5-3 with four third period goals. Picard scored a pair as the Caps lifted their ledger to 17-27-8.

Bob Sirois scored Washington's lone goal in a 5-1 loss to Vancouver on February 3, registering his second straight 20-goal campaign in the process. One night later, Sirois scored the 1,000th goal in franchise history in an 8-4 loss to the Montreal Canadiens. The Capitals scored three goals off Montreal's Bunny Larocque in the first 2:25 - the fastest three goals to start a game in Caps history - but were outscored 8-1 the rest of the way. The Caps were still looking for their first-ever win over the Habs at the time.

On February 15, the Capitals set a club record for most goals in a game with a 9-3 thrashing of the Colorado Rockies. Maruk, Charron and Polis each scored twice and Picard tied a club record with four assists.

Tom Rowe became the fifth Capital to reach the 20-goal level when he bagged his 20th in a 4-3 loss to Detroit on February 21. The Caps set a club record with 45 shots on the Detroit net that night.

The Caps scored five goals against the Montreal Canadiens - their highest total ever against the Habs - on February 25. But it wasn't enough to register their first win against the Frenchmen as Montreal prevailed, 8-5. Rowe had a pair of goals, marking the third straight game in which he scored.

Rowe scored again in the Caps' 3-3 tie with Los Angeles on February 28 and then he matched Walter's club record by scoring in a fifth straight game with a tally in Washington's 6-2 victory over Vancouver on March 2. With the win over the Canucks, the Caps matched their point total (48) of the previous season.

The Caps beat the North Stars by a 5-4 score on March 4. Rowe's goal streak was stopped, but he did have two assists and Charron scored his 200th NHL goal.

Rowe returned to the "goal" column of the scoresheet with a vengeance on March 10 against St. Louis. He scored three goals in the first period to become the first Capital ever to notch a natural hat trick. His linemates - Maruk and Edberg - assisted on all three goals. Rowe scored a fourth goal in the second period and Maruk added a pair of his own. Rowe tied the club record for goals in a game and he and Maruk tied the club mark with six points on the night. Edberg set a team rookie record with four assists in the contest.

Rowe - who was the fifth Capital to reach the 20-goal plateau - became the first to reach 30 when he tallied in a 3-3 tie against Detroit on March 11. The tie stretched Washington's unbeaten streak to six straight games, the longest in franchise history. Dennis Hextall scored his first goal as a Capital against his former Red Wing teammates. The Caps signed Hextall as



Tom Rowe

a free agent in February, some 30 years after his father (Bryan Hextall, Jr.) skated for the Washington Lions of the American Hockey League.

On March 18, the Caps skated to a 3-3 tie with the Sabres in Buffalo. In the process, Washington set a club record with their fourth consecutive undefeated game on the road. The Caps extended that streak to five straight with a 2-2 tie against the Penguins in Pittsburgh on March 21. Walter scored his 26th goal, equaling the club standard previously held by Nelson Pyatt (1975-76) for most goals by a rookie. Maruk also scored, notching his 82nd point in the process. That tied Charron's club record, set in 1976-77.

Maruk broke Charron's record for points in a season with an assist in a 6-2 loss to the Maple Leafs on March 28. Picard became the first Caps defenseman to attain a 20-goal season in that game and also notched his 100th point in a Washington uniform. Walter assisted on Picard's goal and picked up his 50th point in the process. Walter broke Pyatt's rookie record of 49 points (set in 1975-76) in the process.

On April 1, the Caps jumped out to a 4-0 lead over one of their longtime nemeses, the New York Islanders. The Caps held on for a 6-4 win, their first-ever triumph over the Islanders. The Caps had never scored more than three goals in nineteen previous meetings (0-16-3) against the Isles. Rolf Edberg scored twice for the Caps and Charron netted his 100th goal as a Capital. The win over New York left Boston, Philadelphia and Montreal as the only teams against which the Caps had not recorded a victory.

Washington fell to the Canadiens again on April 7, this time by a 10-3 score. Pierre Mondou registered a hat trick and Guy Lafleur totaled six points for the Habs. Maruk became the first Capital to enjoy a 90-point season when he assisted on Craig Patrick's first period goal.

The Caps closed out their season with a 5-2 win over the Penguins on April 8. Walter scored twice to erase Pyatt's rookie record for goals. The victory left Washington with a 24-41-15 record and 63 points; the best total in team history and a 15-point improvement over the 1977-78 season.

With five seasons in the books, the Caps were still having difficulty establishing a strong fan base and had yet to come close to achieving a playoff berth. More changes and more "baby steps" of improvement lay ahead.

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On the Verge

The Capitals' 1979-80 season
by Mike Vogel

Heading into the sixth season of their NHL existence, the Capitals were still in search of their first-ever playoff berth. There was a lot of off-ice activity in the summer of 1979 - Bengt Gustafsson and Mike Gartner both joined the fold after making their pro debuts in the newly defunct World Hockey Association in 1978-79. Original Caps Mike Marson and Blair Stewart departed Washington.

Gustafsson was Washington's seventh choice (55th overall) in the 1978 Entry Draft but he opted to play for the WHA's Edmonton Oilers rather than join the Capitals. Washington reclaimed his rights from the Oil in June of 1979. Two months later, The Capitals tabbed Gartner as their first pick (fourth overall) in the 1979 Entry Draft. Marson was dispatched to Los Angeles in a June, 1979 trade. Prematurely ushered to the NHL because of Washington's terminal dearth of talent, Marson never lived up to his potential. The Caps got Steve Clippingdale from the Kings in return.

Stewart, Gord Smith and Bill Riley were lost in the expansion draft as four former WHA franchises merged into the NHL to bring league membership to 21 teams. Goaltender Wayne Stephenson was obtained from Philadelphia a few weeks before the opening of training camp.

For the first time in four seasons, the Caps failed to win their first game. Gustafsson and Gartner each picked up assists for their first NHL points on opening night. The Capitals took a short-lived 3-2 lead in the second period on Dennis Maruk's goal, but Buffalo's Gilbert Perreault tied it just 1:01 later. Only 29 seconds after Perreault's goal, Derek Smith scored to give the Sabres a lead they would not relinquish.

After dropping their home opener to the Bruins, the Caps gained their first win of the season over the Rangers at Madison Square Garden. Maruk scored four goals as the Caps bounced New York, 5-3.

An embarrassingly small crowd of 5,386 turned out for Washington's second home tilt of the season, an October 16 date with the Los Angeles Kings. Gustafsson and Gartner both scored their first NHL goals and the Caps gained a hard-fought 8-6 win over the Kings. Guy Charron netted the game-winner and Maruk scored for the fourth straight contest. The Kings' Marcel Dionne became the 27th player in NHL history to get 800 points.

For the sixth time in six seasons, the team got off to an abysmal start. After splitting their first four games (2-2-0), the Caps lost four straight and went 2-6-2 in their next 10. The slow start spelled the end for Danny Belisle behind the Washington bench. With the Caps mired at 4-10-2, a change was made. Twenty-six-year-old Gary Green became the sixth head coach in the club's six seasons.

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Before the Caps tabbed him to replace Belisle, Green had coached in the Ontario Hockey League and was briefly behind the bench of the Hershey Bears of the American Hockey League. Although he was the youngest coach in NHL history and was younger than many of his players, Green stepped in and piloted the Capitals to a 23-30-11 record the rest of the way through the 1979-80 season.

Green's first game with the Caps was a road tilt in Boston. The Caps took a 2-1 lead into the third period but couldn't hold it. Stan Jonathan and Dickie Redmond scored for the Bruins to spoil Green's debut.



Rick Green

The Caps returned home to face Detroit but the skid continued. After losses to the Red Wings and Atlanta, the Caps salvaged a tie against the Rockies in Colorado. Then they dropped decisions to Chicago and Buffalo before earning a tie in their first-ever trip to Quebec. A home-ice loss to the Maple Leafs pushed Green's record to 0-6-2 and extended the team's winless skid to 10 straight.

Green finally entered the win column when the Caps battered Quebec by a 7-2 count before a sparse gathering of 6,892 at the Capital Centre on December 1. Washington blew open a 2-2 tie with five third period goals against the Nordiques' Goran Hogosta. Mike Gartner scored a hat trick for the Caps and Wes Jarvis tied club records with three assists and four assists in a period.

After the win over Quebec, the Caps returned to their losing ways. They went 0-4-1 in their next five games.

On December 7, the Caps sent defenseman Gord Lane to the New York Islanders for center Mike Kaszycki. Lane would become a regular blueliner for the Islanders' dynasty of the early 1980s. He won four Stanley Cup rings playing on Long Island. Kaszycki was a Cap for less than three months; he was flipped to Toronto for Pat Ribble on February 16.

Washington returned to the win column with a 5-4 home ice win over the Rangers on December 15. The Caps spotted the Rangers a 4-0 lead before roaring back with five third period tallies (on just seven shots) against beleaguered New York netminder John Davidson. Five different Caps dented the twine and the goals came within a span of 11:45.

After Christmas, the Caps put together consecutive victories for the first time since October 14-16 and the first time in the Green era. Washington pummeled the Maple Leafs 8-2 in Toronto on December 26. It was the Caps' first win ever in Toronto. Guy Charron paved the way with a hat trick and Ryan Walter had four assists. Charron's third goal of the game gave him 500 points for his NHL career.

Charron notched three assists and Kaszycki scored twice in a 6-2 win over Chicago at the Capital Centre on December 28.

Washington opened the new decade with a 6-3 win in Hartford on January 4. The Caps scored four times in the third period to break a 2-2 deadlock. Charron and Antero Lehtonen led the way with two goals each.

After a 2-2 tie with Minnesota on January 5, the Caps pounded Vancouver by a 7-4 score on January 11. Mike Gartner scored a pair of goals and Ryan Walter added a shorthanded tally.

On January 17, the Caps shipped Tom Rowe to Hartford in exchange for rookie defenseman Alan Hangsleben. After netting 31 goals in 1978-79, Rowe had tallied just 10 times in 41

games in 1979-80.

Hangsleben found the back of the net in his first game as a Capital, a 4-4 deadlock against Philly on January 19. In front of a sellout crowd of 18,130 at the Capital Centre, the Caps came from behind to take a 4-3 third period lead on Kaszycki's goal at 7:23. Washington appeared to be headed toward its first-ever win over the Flyers, but Philly pulled netminder Phil Myre in the final minute of play and the Flyers' Bobby Clarke tied the score with a mere four seconds remaining on the clock.

The Capitals put a 7-1 hurting on the New York Islanders at the Cap Centre on January 27. New York nemesis Mike Bossy gave the Fishermen a 1-0 lead with a first period goal, but the Caps stormed back with a six-spot in the second. Washington set an NHL record with two goals in 30 seconds at the start of the second period. (Buffalo set the old mark at 31 seconds on January 10, 1974.) Gartner scored at the eight-second mark and Bengt Gustafsson followed just 22 seconds later. Paul Mulvey scored at the 58-second mark to give the Caps a 3-1 lead and three goals in 58 seconds against future Hall of Fame netminder Billy Smith. Gustafsson and Walter each tallied twice and Paul MacKinnon netted his first NHL goal in Washington's rout of the Islanders. It was the most goals the Caps had ever scored against the Isles.

Three losses and a tie followed before Washington got back on the winning track with a 6-3 win in Winnipeg on February 8. Walter and Rolf Edberg each scored a pair of goals to pave the way for Washington.

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On the Verge

The Capitals' 1979-80 season
by Mike Vogel

The Caps continued their road trip with a stop in Los Angeles on February 12. The Kings jumped out to a 2-1 lead but the Caps scored four answered goals to win it, 5-2. Walter again scored twice.

Three nights later, the Caps had a hand in history while taking an 8-2 beating at the hands of the Edmonton Oilers. Wayne Gretzky - then all of 19 years old - tied an NHL record with seven assists. All seven were primary assists and five came at even strength. Blair MacDonald was the primary recipient of Gretzky's passing prowess; he notched a hat trick for the Oil.

The Caps closed out the trip on a winning note with a 5-3 triumph over the Canucks in Vancouver on February 16. Five different Caps beat the Canucks' Glen Hanlon to make a winner of Washington netminder Wayne Stephenson. Washington went 3-1-1 on the five-game trip.

The Caps returned home to take on the Montreal Canadiens. A crowd of 13,551 witnessed Washington's first-ever win over the Habs. The Caps were outshot 32-16 but Stephenson outdueled Montreal's Denis Herron, 3-1. Robert Picard and Gustafsson scored for the Caps and Gartner's empty-netter sealed it with 50 seconds remaining. Prior to this victory, the Capitals were a hapless 0-31-3 against Les Habitants.

After suffering a 3-0 shutout at the hands of the Flames in Atlanta, the Caps returned home and thumped the Blackhawks by a 6-2 score on February 23. Gartner and Mark Lofthouse each scored twice; Gartner became the first Cap to get to the 20-goal barrier.

After a 5-3 win over Los Angeles on February 26, the Caps dropped three straight, falling to 19-35-10 in the process. Dennis Maruk returned to the lineup on February 28. he had missed four months of action after suffering torn ligaments in his right knee. The final loss of the three-game skid was a 3-1 setback to Colorado in the first game of a six-game homestand. Washington would not lose another until they set out on the road again.

The streak began with a 7-5 win over St. Louis on March 5. Gartner had a hat trick, Bob Sirois scored twice and Paul Mulvey had four assists. Gartner's goals were all scored in the first period and came within a span of just 4:49. Mulvey's assists all came in the first and established a club mark for most assists in a period.

On March 8, Hartford fell victim to a nine-goal Washington onslaught as the Caps prevailed, 9-5. Gartner, Sirois and Gustafsson each scored twice and Robert Picard picked up five points to break his own club record for points in a game by a defenseman. Four of the Capital goals

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came on the power play to tie a season high and the club record.

On March 9, the Caps humbled the Islanders by a 3-1 score. The win moved Washington into a tie for the final playoff berth. Rolf Edberg scored the game-winner as Wayne Stephenson outdueled New York's Chico Resch between the pipes.



Paul Mulvey

On March 12, the Caps registered their first-ever win over the Bruins, 6-4. Six different Caps scored as Washington overcame a 3-1 second period deficit and hung the loss on future Hall of Fame goaltender Gerry Cheevers. Walter notched his 20th goal, Mulvey broke the club single-season penalty-minute mark with 219 and Gartner tied a club mark with a goal in five consecutive games. Prior to the triumph, the Caps were 0-21-5 against the Beantowners.

With 15,742 fans in attendance, the Caps closed out the homestand with a 5-2 win over Detroit on March 15. Gartner scored again, setting a club record by scoring in his sixth straight contest. The win was Washington's fifth straight, a new club record. The Caps also tied records for most wins in a season (24), most wins at home (17) and most consecutive wins at home (five).

The winning streak came to an end with a 3-3 tie at Boston on March 16 but Gartner extended his scoring streak to seven games with a first period goal. The Caps held a 3-2 lead late in the third period until a rookie defenseman by the name of Raymond Bourque scored to tie it for Boston with just 28 seconds remaining in the game.

The Caps returned home on March 18 and beat the Colorado Rockies, 4-1. Gartner extended his goal-scoring streak to eight games and Maruk netted his first since returning to action from the knee injury. The win moved Washington into 15th place in the overall NHL standings and established club records for longest undefeated streak (seven games), most wins (25), most home wins (18) and longest home winning streak (six games).

Washington then suffered three straight setbacks. The third loss - a 6-1 thumping at the hands of the Maple Leafs in Toronto - dropped the Caps into a tie for the final playoff berth. Edberg scored the lone Washington goal, reaching the 20-goal plateau in the process.

The Caps got back into the win column with a 4-2 home ice victory over St. Louis on March 26. Gustafsson scored his 20th to join Gartner, Walter and Edberg as 20-goal getters and Stephenson established a club record with his 17th win. The Caps tied the team record for most points in a season with 63, first attained in 1978-79.

A capacity crowd filled the Capital Centre on March 29 as the Philadelphia Flyers came to visit. After Philly jumped out to a 2-0 first period lead, the Caps scored three straight in the second. But Tom Gorence scored for Philly with only 37 seconds left in the second. The two teams played a scoreless third and wound up tied, 3-3. The tie gave the Capitals new club marks for points (67) in a season and points at home (43). It also left Washington with a 0-17-6 all-time mark against Philadelphia.

With four games remaining, Washington was still in contention for a playoff berth. The Caps were two points behind Edmonton for the final postseason spot.

The Caps' hopes were dealt a severe blow when Pittsburgh's Greg Millen shut them out 4-0 at the Igloo on March 30. Washington rebounded to beat the Penguins in the second half of the home-and-home set, 6-2 on April 1. Six different Caps scored; three of them on the power play. The



Oilers suffered a 5-0 loss to Vancouver. With two games remaining, the Capitals and the Oilers had identical 27-39-12 records and were tied for the final playoff spot.

The Oilers jumped ahead by a point with a 1-1 tie against Minnesota on April 2. The Caps traveled to Philadelphia for an April 3 date against a Flyers team they had never defeated. Alan Hangesleben scored a power play goal at 9:05 of the first to give the Capitals the lead. Sirois expanded it to 2-0 at 17:51.



Wayne Stephenson

And that was that. A pair of ugly brawls broke out just after the 13-minute mark of the second and Philly seemed to gain the momentum shortly thereafter. Reggie Leach scored at 15:36 to pull the Flyers within a goal. Jimmy Watson tied it for the Flyers at 18:51. A total of 105 minutes in penalties was whistled in the period, setting a new single period mark for a Capitals game. Leach scored his second of the game at 5:08 of the third and completed his hat trick into an empty net at 19:32. Bobby Clarke had the primary assist on all four Philadelphia goals. With just one game remaining, the Caps trailed Edmonton by a point.

The Oilers wrapped up the final spot on April 4 with a 6-2 win over Colorado. The Caps closed out their season with a meaningless home game, but all 18,130 seats were filled as Washington hosted Atlanta. Edberg, Picard, Walter and Maruk scored but Atlanta's Ken Houston scored the tying goal at 17:34 of the third. The two clubs closed out the campaign with a 4-4 tie.

The Capitals made real progress and seemed to come together under Gary Green's tutelage in the season's final month. With exciting young players like Gartner, Walter, Gustafsson and Picard plus capable veterans such as Charron and Maruk, the Capitals finally seemed to be on the brink of evolving from also-ran to contender. History shows they weren't quite there yet, however.

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Not enough offense, not enough defense

A look back at the Capitals' 1980-81 season

By Mike Vogel

For the first five years of their existence, the Washington Capitals were nowhere close to being a playoff team. Finally, in Year Six (1979-80), the Caps contended for a postseason berth before falling short by a single point at seasons' end.

At the conclusion of that season, the Capitals looked pretty good on paper. They had four solid young players who were drafted and developed in DC: defenseman Robert Picard and forwards Ryan Walter, Mike Gartner and Bengt Gustafsson. Veteran forwards Guy Charron and Dennis Maruk both suffered through injury-plagued seasons in 1979-80, but both were proven NHL goals scorers. Charron was 31 as the 1980-81 campaign dawned; Maruk was about to turn 25. The forward corps also boasted Rolf Edberg and Bob Sirois – both of whom had 20-goal NHL seasons on their resumes.

Picard led the defense but the blueline brigade also featured former first overall pick Rick Green, veterans Yvon Labre and Pierre Bouchard plus promising sophomores Alan Hangesleben and Paul MacKinnon. A shoulder injury ended the career of two-way rearguard Leif Svensson after just two seasons in DC. He returned to his native Sweden to complete medical school after the 1979-80 season.

Wayne Stephenson was the incumbent goaltender. He played in a club record 56 games in 1979-80 and was supported by Rollie Boutin and Gary Inness. If there was an area the Capitals were looking to shore up heading into the 1980-81 season, it was goaltending.



Dennis Maruk

On June 11, 1980, Capitals general manager Max McNab pulled the trigger on a three-player swap that also included a pair of draft picks. McNab sent Picard, left wing prospect Tim Coulis and the team's second round pick in the 1980 Entry Draft to the Toronto Maple Leafs in exchange for goaltender Mike Palmateer and the Leafs' third-round pick in the '80 Entry Draft.

Palmateer was 26 at the time and had just finished his fourth season in Toronto, where he was a huge fan favorite. Known as the "Popcorn Kid" as a nod to his preferred pregame snack, Palmateer was a diminutive and daring netminder. The right-handed catching goaltender loved to wander away from his crease and handle the puck. He set an NHL record for goaltenders (since broken) in his first season in DC with eight assists. Palmateer was also known for his acrobatic style, his exaggerated glove saves, and his long, curly strawberry-blond locks.

After three solid seasons as the Leafs' top netminder, Palmateer played in only 38 games in 1979-80 because of an ankle injury. He also had a history of knee problems. By the time he got to Washington, Palmateer had already undergone several knee surgeries. He underwent knee replacement surgery after his playing days came to an end.

There was little question that the Caps needed a proven goaltender but the team paid a significant price to acquire Palmateer. Picard was the third player taken overall in the 1977 NHL Entry Draft and had lived up to his billing during his three seasons in DC. He averaged 14 goals and 52 points in those three seasons and was easily the best offensive threat the Caps had ever had on the backline.

Both Palmateer and Picard were relative short-timers with their new clubs. Palmateer played well for the Caps in '80-81 but underwent two knee surgeries in his second season with Washington. He was sold back to the Leafs just prior to the 1982-83 season when it became apparent that Al Jensen would be able to assume the lion's share of Washington's goaltending responsibilities.

Picard was swapped to Montreal midway through his first season with the Maple Leafs. In an ironic twist, he was traded even-up for goaltender Michel "Bunny" Larocque, Ken Dryden's longtime caddy with the Habs.

Although the loss of Picard left the Caps in need of a defenseman or two, the rest of the offseason additions in the summer of 1980 were made to bolster the forward corps. Veteran winger Jean Pronovost was purchased from Calgary and Bob "Hounddog" Kelly (not to be confused with "Battleship" Bob Kelly) was obtained from the Flyers for a draft pick. Just days before the start of the season, the Caps inked free agent right wing Dennis Ververgaert to a contract.

Palmateer was between the pipes for Washington when it opened its regular season schedule at home against Winnipeg on October 10. A disappointing crowd of 12,984 watched as Palmateer stopped 18 of 19 Jets shots and the Caps prevailed, 4-1. Ververgaert and Kelly each had two assists and Pronovost notched one helper. Dennis Maruk scored twice. Palmateer lost his shutout with just 1:12 left in the third period when Winnipeg's Dave Babych beat him. The opening night victory was Washington's fourth in its seven NHL seasons.



Mike Palmateer

A 2-1 loss to the Islanders and a 3-3 tie with Montreal followed. The Caps then closed out their four-game homestand with an 8-2 thrashing of the Rangers at the Capital Centre on October 18. Mike Gartner scored four goals, joining Stan Gilbertson, Tom Rowe and Dennis Maruk as the only Capitals to accomplish that feat. Maruk had two goals in the rout of the Rangers and also assisted on two of Gartner's goals.

The Caps took to the road for the first time in the 1980-81 campaign, toting with them a record of 2-1-1. It marked the first time in franchise history that the team had been above .500 more than one game into a season. The Blackhawks took care of that by thumping the Caps 8-4 at the Chicago Stadium on October 19. The Hawks scored three power play goals against Palmateer. Ryan Walter scored twice for the Caps and Gartner and Maruk added single tallies.

The Caps returned home, bringing the Blackhawks with them. With Wayne Stephenson in goal, the Caps shutout the Hawks, 2-0 in front of 7,156 patrons at the Cap Centre. It was Washington's first shutout since January 4, 1978, a span of 209 games. Pat Ribble's power play goal at 10:26 of the middle period supplied the Caps with all the offense they would need. For the sixth straight game, Washington netted a power play goal, one short of the franchise record. Gartner added an empty-netter with one second remaining on the clock.

The Caps dropped back to .500 (3-3-1) with a 3-2 home ice loss at the hands of the St. Louis Blues. Washington then followed the Blues to St. Louis for the start of a five-game road trip. The journey was a successful one; the Caps earned four ties and suffered but one loss, a 4-2 setback to the Kings in Los Angeles. A 5-5 tie with the Rockies in Colorado was disappointing because the Caps held a two-goal lead with less than two minutes remaining. Randy Pierce and

Lanny McDonald scored to draw the Rockies even.

Washington pulled off a similar feat in Winnipeg on November 2 to close out the trip. Winnipeg's Norm Dupont completed a hat trick at 15:44 of the third, giving the Jets a seemingly comfortable 4-2 lead. With 1:31 left, Washington's Rick Green scored to cut the deficit to a single goal. The Caps pulled netminder Stephenson in an effort to get the equalizer and the gambit paid off with only five seconds remaining when Pronovost scored his second of the season to deny Winnipeg's Lindsay Middlebrook a seemingly certain victory.

The Caps returned home and suffered a 5-3 loss to LA on November 5. After spotting Buffalo a three-goal lead on November 8, the Caps stormed back with three of their own in the third period to earn a 3-3 tie. In Buffalo on the following night, the Sabres grabbed a 3-1 lead but the Caps again gained a 3-3 tie with a pair of third period scores by Pronovost. The tie extended Washington's winless streak to nine straight (0-3-6).

Washington returned to the win column with a 3-1 victory in Pittsburgh on November 12. Maruk supplied all the offense with a hat trick to support Stephenson's 30-save performance.

The Caps bolstered their defense by claiming veteran Rick Smith on waivers from the Detroit Red Wings. The 32-year-old defenseman was a member of Stanley Cup winning teams with Boston in 1970 and 1972. Smith suited up for his first game in Hartford on November and netted the game-winner in an 8-4 triumph. But Maruk was the real story; he became the first Capital ever to record hat tricks in consecutive games and tied a club mark by registering a point in his 10th straight game. With the win, the Caps extended their road unbeaten streak to six straight, a new franchise record.

Maruk was held off the scoresheet in Washington's next game a 6-2 setback to the Nordiques in Quebec.

On November 20, the Caps defeated Calgary at home by a 4-2 score. Rookie defenseman Darren Veitch – the team's top pick in the previous summer's Entry Draft – opened the scoring with his first NHL goal. Gartner scored twice, including the game-winner.

After a 2-2 tie with Boston on November 22, the Caps flew to Motown for a November 26 date with the Detroit Red Wings. A wild game ensued. It started innocently enough; each club scored once in the first although Detroit outshot Washington 12-3. The Wings opened it up with three late second period goals. The three tallies came within 2:43 and enabled the Wings to take a commanding 4-1 lead to the dressing room for the second intermission.

CONTINUE 

Not enough offense, not enough defense

A look back at the Capitals' 1980-81 season

By Mike Vogel

The Caps started swiftly in the third. Gartner scored at the 58-second mark and Bob Kelly followed with another just 16 seconds later to pull the Caps within one at 4-3. After Dennis Polonich scored to give the Wings a 5-3 advantage, Gartner tallied to make it 5-4. Ververgaert tied it for the Caps at 10:28 and stunned the Wings by beating Jim Rutherford again just 13 seconds later to give Washington its first lead of the night at 6-5. Ververgaert tied a club mark (held by Bob Sirois) for fastest two goals. Mike Foligno tied it at 6-6 for Detroit when he beat Palmateer at the 12:13 mark. Maruk restored the Washington lead with a goal at 14:27 but Detroit's George Lyle answered to make it 7-7. That's how it ended, as the highest scoring tie game in Caps history. The Caps had played to nine ties in their first 21 games.

Washington returned home to begin a home-and-home set with the Maple Leafs. When the Caps trounced Toronto 6-2 at the Cap Centre on November 28, it raised their record to 7-6-9, the latest they had ever been above .500 in franchise history. Maruk led the way with a pair of goals and Washington scored three times on the power play.

One night later, the Caps claimed the back end of the set by drubbing the Leafs 7-3 at Maple Leaf Gardens. Toronto outshot the Caps 45-21 but Palmateer stonewalled his former mates. Kelly, Wes Jarvis and Gartner each scored twice and Maruk netted his 20th of the season.

Washington came home and skated to a 3-3 tie with the North Stars. Bob Kelly scored twice within 13 seconds midway through the third to erase a 3-1 Minnesota advantage. Kelly joined Bob Sirois and Dennis Ververgaert in the Washington record books for fastest two goals. It was the fifth straight game in which Kelly had scored. Ryan Walter and Jean Pronovost both tied the club mark with assists in five straight games.



Bob "Hounddog" Kelly

On December 6, the Caps reached what would prove to be their high-water mark for the season with an 8-6 win over the Colorado Rockies. Pronovost had a hat trick and Walter picked up an assist in his sixth straight game to establish a new franchise mark. The win gave the Capitals a 9-6-10 record.

Washington proceeded to lose five straight and was outscored 28-13 in the process. In the midst of the losing streak, Walter extended his record assist streak to eight straight games. The Caps would not see the sunny side of the .500 mark for the rest of the season.

Five different Caps scored against Edmonton on December 17 as Washington ended its skid with a 5-2 win over the Oilers. With 21 first period shots on goal, the Caps set a record for shots in a period at home.

Tim Tookey scored his first NHL goal and Bob Kelly scored against his former mates to give the Caps a 2-0 first period lead over the Flyers on December 20. But Philly roared back with five unanswered goals to win, 5-2.

The Caps and Flyers headed to Philly for the second game of the back-to-back set on December 21. Philly outshot the Caps 44-21 but Palmateer was the equal of every shot fired his way. The Caps blasted the Flyers, 6-0. It was their first ever win over Philadelphia and the team's first road shutout since January 10, 1977 at Detroit. The contest was a brawl-filled

affair; more than 300 minutes in penalties were whistled. Each team received four 10-minute misconducts at the 19-second mark of the first period. Rookie Archie Henderson – a 6-foot-6, 220-pound winger – was recalled from the minors by the Caps specifically to face the Flyers. He beat down Philly heavyweight Behn Wilson twice in the first period and the Caps rode that momentum to victory.

The Caps rode that momentum to a 7-3 win over the Rangers on December 26. Kelly and Maruk each scored a pair of goals and Howard Walker tallied his first NHL goal. The win elevated the Caps back to the .500 mark at 12-12-10.

Washington closed out the calendar year with a bang in Winnipeg. The Caps spotted the Jets a three-goal lead before roaring back with five unanswered goals, four of them in the third period. Palmateer picked up the win and also picked up his sixth assist of the season, tying an NHL record for goaltenders. Pronovost paced the offense with a pair of goals.

The Caps opened calendar 1981 by dropping five straight. They were shutout twice – the first times they had been shutout all season – and were outscored 26-6 in the five games. The Caps broke the skein with a 2-1 win at Colorado on January 12.

On January 15, the Caps blanked Los Angeles behind rookie goaltender Dave Parro, who was recalled from the Hershey of the AHL after Palmateer suffered an injury. Parro made 29 stops to record his first NHL shutout in his fourth start in the league.

Washington held the New York Islanders scoreless for more than 33 minutes of the game on January 17. Combined with Parro's shutout and the win over Colorado, this extended Washington's consecutive shutout spell to 137 minutes and 56 seconds, a new franchise standard. Unfortunately for the Caps, the floodgates opened thereafter and the Isles scored six times in a 6-4 win. Longtime nemesis Mike Bossy notched a hat trick.

Parro's personal shutout streak reached 119 minutes and one second before Hartford's Mike Rogers beat him on a power play in the January 18 game. Parro and the Caps prevailed, however, 3-2.

With a 7-4 win over Edmonton on February 1, the Caps climbed up to 19-21-12 and a respectable 50 points. Rolf Edberg and Dennis Maruk led the attack with two goals each. But the Capitals would win only seven of their final 28 games to dash any hopes of a first postseason berth.

The skid started in Vancouver on February 3. The Caps and Canucks skated to a 3-3 tie, but Washington lost Palmateer to an ankle injury.

In the very next game – a 5-2 loss to the Flames at Calgary – Parro suffered a dislocated shoulder, leaving the Caps with but one healthy netminder.

Palmateer was rushed back into action and started on February 7, a 4-4 tie against the Kings in Los Angeles. Bob Kelly had a hat trick for the Caps and his final goal – with 1:55 left – earned a point for Washington.

Palmateer was hurt again in a 6-3 loss to Buffalo on February 12. Parro came into the game early in the first and was the victim of all six goals.

It was Parro's turn to get hurt in the February 14 game in Montreal. He gave way to Wayne Stephenson after allowing four goals on 26 shots. Stephenson – who would retire at the conclusion of the season for medical reasons of his own – gave up two more in a 6-1 loss to

http://washingtoncaps.com/utility/gcns.cfm?cont_id=78179

the Habs.

Palmateer was back between the pipes for the February 18 tilt with Chicago. He was not sharp; he allowed five goals on 33 shots in a 5-5 tie. Ryan Walter scored twice for Washington.

Palmateer was victimized by the Rangers on February 21. Don Maloney scored a natural hat trick within 2:30 of the second period to lead the Blueshirts to a 6-4 win.



Mike Gartner

The Caps and Palmateer bottomed out on February 22 against Quebec at the Capital Centre. After surrendering eight goals on 23 shots, Palmateer yielded to Stephenson. The Caps scored seven goals of their own but lost, 11-7. Peter Stastny scored four goals for the Nordiques; brother Anton Stastny and Jacques Richard each had hat tricks. Peter Stastny added four assists for an eight-point night. Anton Stastny had a seven-point night. Bengt Gustafsson had two goals and two assists for the Caps. Each team scored four power play goals.

Washington's next game was a February 25 tilt in Chicago. Palmateer played his best game in quite a while; he stopped 43 of 45 shots in a 2-2 tie. Alan Hangesleben's goal midway through the third period tied it for the Caps.

On February 26, Palmateer recorded his seventh assist of the season to establish a new NHL mark for goaltenders. Pronovost and Gartner each scored twice but it wasn't enough as the Caps fell to Pittsburgh, 4-3.

Palmateer gave up seven more goals – on just 26 shots – in the next Washington game, a 7-4 loss to the Blues in St. Louis. Jorgen Petterson had a hat trick for the Blues.

Parro started the March 3 game against Calgary but was pulled after allowing four goals in just over a period. Palmateer came on in relief, but the Caps fell, 6-3. When Quebec beat the Caps 7-4 the next night, Washington's winless streak reached 13 (0-9-4).

Maruk helped end the skid when he racked up a hat trick against Toronto on March 8. Rick Green added a pair of goals and the Caps won, 7-3.

Glen Currie scored twice to help the Caps nip the Rockies by a 4-3 score on March 10. Washington outshot Colorado by a healthy 35-15 margin in that one.

Five different Caps scored against Hartford on March 11 as Washington won its third straight game, 5-2. Palmateer was between the pipes for all three Washington victories.

The Caps then proceeded to lose three straight games, falling to Boston, Toronto and Quebec. In the Quebec game on March 18, Robbie Ftorek notched a hat trick for the Nords. Mike Gartner scored his 40th goal and also tied a club record by registering a point for the 10th straight game.

Gartner set the club mark for consecutive games with a point on March 21 when he picked up an assist in a 3-3 tie with St. Louis. Tim Tookey scored a pair of late third period goals to rally the Caps from a 3-1 deficit and Gary Inness stopped 30 of 33 St. Louis shots on goal.

Inness was in the nets again when Montreal came calling to the Cap Centre on March 22. Gartner had a goal and an assist to run his streak to 12 games and Inness was superb in stopping 37 of 39 Canadiens' shots. But Mario Tremblay's third period goal enabled the Habs to

escape with a 2-2 tie.

Palmateer was back in the nets when the Caps traveled to Philly on March 24. Gartner had a hat trick to push his points streak to 13 straight and the Caps conquered the Flyers, 5-2.

Two nights later, the Caps moved to Motown for a date with the Red Wings. Washington scored two power play goals and Palmateer stopped all 25 Detroit shots to give the Caps a 2-0 win, their fourth shutout of the season. Gartner extended his streak to 14 games and Maruk ran his consecutive-games-with-a-point streak to 11 games.

Both players made the scoresheet again on March 27, but the Caps fell to Hartford, 5-3. Maruk pushed his season total to 91 points, setting a new single season franchise mark.

On March 29, the Caps sold out the Capital Centre for a game with the Islanders. Washington – fighting for the NHL's final playoff berth – took a 4-3 lead early in the third period on a Ryan Walter goal. Caps defenseman Pat Ribble was whistled for slashing at 8:27 and New York's Stefan Persson made Washington pay when he scored on the ensuing power play. Cap killer Mike Bossy iced the game for the Isles with less than six minutes to play and the Caps dropped a heartbreaker, 5-4. Maruk's streak was snapped at 12 games while Gartner extended his to 16.

Bob Kelly scored a power play goal with 4:24 left in the third to enable the Caps to edge the Bruins by a 3-2 score on April 2. Gartner assisted on the second Caps goal of the evening to stretch his streak to 17 straight games with a point.

Gartner's streak came to an end on April 4 when the Islanders defeated the Caps, 4-1. Maruk netted the lone Washington goal on a third period power play.

On April 5, the Caps closed out the regular season with a 7-2 win over Detroit at the Capital Centre. Maruk notched a hat trick, giving him exactly 50 goals on the season. He became the first Cap to reach that plateau.

The Capitals closed out the season with a 26-36-18 mark and a franchise record 70 points. But they finished one point behind the Toronto Maple Leafs for the final playoff berth. Done in by a 7-15-6 finish, the Caps missed the playoffs for the seventh time in their seven-year existence. Heading into Year Eight (1981-82), the heads of head coach Gary Green and general manager Max McNab would be squarely on the chopping block. There was no room for error.



TEAM

Movin' On Up

The Capitals 1982-83 season

By Mike Vogel

In the summer of 1982, a group of concerned Capitals fans was fretting over the object of its collective affections. The "Save the Caps" committee was formed after many seasons of horrendous hockey and apathetic attendance threatened to leave the DC area without an NHL team. Just prior to the start of the 1982-83 season, the problem was solved.



Capitals GM David Poile, right, posing for the team photo in 1982.

After missing the playoffs in each of their first eight seasons, the Washington Capitals' braintrust took proactive steps to reverse the team's terminal misfortune. Late in August of 1982, the Capitals hired 33-year-old David Poile to serve as the team's general manager. Poile, who replaced interim GM Roger Crozier, became the youngest GM in NHL history.

Poile's first day on the job was August 30, 1982. He took over a team that had scored a club record 319 goals but finished last in the Patrick Division with just 65 points. The '81-82 Caps featured five 30-goal scorers, including Dennis Maruk who scored 60 goals and totaled 136 points, both club records that stand to this day. But the Capitals also surrendered 338 goals, the third-highest total in the Prince of Wales Conference.

Legend has it that Poile was adamant about receiving a three-year deal from the Caps. President/Chairman of the Board Abe Pollin was reluctant to give a lengthy commitment to a young, first-time GM, but relented because he figured that if Poile did not get the Caps into the playoffs, the franchise would be moved elsewhere. Poile wasted no time in changing the face of the moribund organization.

Just two days before Poile took over, Crozier made the final move of his 10-month term as Washington's GM. (Crozier's best move had to be choosing teenaged defenseman Scott Stevens with the team's first pick - the fifth overall - in the June Entry Draft.) Crozier sent a pair of draft picks to Chicago for a pair of veteran role players, forward Ted Bulley and rugged defenseman Dave Hutchison. (Hutchison was later lost to New Jersey in the annual waiver draft.)

It didn't take Poile long to make a much bigger handprint of his own.

On September 9, 1982, Poile pulled the trigger on a blockbuster deal that forever altered the hockey landscape in Washington. The new Caps GM dealt away team captain Ryan Walter and stalwart defenseman Rick Green to the Montreal Canadiens in exchange for defenseman Rod Langway and Brian Engblom and wingers Doug Jarvis and Craig Laughlin. Poile's first move as Washington's GM proved to be his best.

On the same day, Poile dealt goaltender Mike Palmateer back to Toronto in a cash deal. The Caps were set for the upcoming season and would go through the entire campaign without making a significant personnel transaction, a refreshing change from the revolving door policy of previous seasons.

The Caps kicked off a highly anticipated regular season with a 5-4 win over the Rangers at Madison Square Garden on October 6. Washington trailed 2-0 and 4-3 before Mike Gartner sealed the deal with the game-winner at 18:10 of the third period.

Despite the new look, Washington got out of the gates slowly. The Caps went 3-7-2 in their first dozen games and were outscored by a 56-42 margin in the process.

The Capitals got going with a 3-0 whitewash of New Jersey on November 10. Al Jensen earned credit for the shutout, but it was a team effort. The Devils were limited to just 19 shots and newcomers Langway and Engblom earned the first and second star designations, respectively.

Jensen carried a shutout into the third period of the next game, a 3-1 Washington triumph over the Islanders, a longtime Capitals nemesis. Jensen's overall shutout streak reached 124:08 before Clark Gillies' third period tally. The whitewash streak established a club record.

On November 16, the Caps extended their modest streak to three straight and outshot the opposition for the seventh straight game in a 5-3 win over Calgary at the Capital Centre. The victory lifted the Caps back to .500 at 7-7-3. The Washington fan base was still skeptical; only 10,705 turned out to see the Caps turn back Calgary.

The Capitals set out on a four-game Western road trip and went winless on the journey. A November 21 loss at Vancouver was particularly painful; the Caps fell 5-3 after taking a 3-0 first period lead. Four third period goals by the Canucks did them in. Washington did manage to come away with two points by virtue of ties in Winnipeg and Edmonton. The tie against the Oilers was gratifying. The Caps rebounded from a 2-0 deficit in that one and actually led 3-2 before Mark Messier's goal tied it with 5:45 left in the third. Washington staved off defeat when goaltender Pat Riggin stoned Edmonton's Wayne Gretzky on a penalty shot with just 1:47 remaining in the third period.

The Caps returned home on November 26 and returned to the win column with a 5-3 triumph over Toronto. Five different players scored in the win that would catapult the Caps off on the hottest streak of their history and lift them to their first-ever playoff berth.



Doug Jarvis

In a streak that actually began with the deadlock in Edmonton, the Caps went on a 14-game unbeaten streak (9-0-5) that lifted their record to 16-9-9 at Christmas. This team that was used to going a month or more without a win had

gone 31 days without tasting defeat. It was a significant achievement as evidenced by the fact that it remains the franchise standard for an unbeaten streak (the 1983-84 Capitals equaled the mark with a 13-0-1 run in January and February of 1984).

By virtue of a 4-4 tie with the Rangers on December 10, the unbeaten streak reached eight, establishing a new club record. Four nights later, the Caps hosted the Los Angeles Kings before a paltry crowd of 8,696. The Caps pasted the Kings, 7-2, but LA's Marcel Dionne made history by becoming just the ninth player in league history to achieve that plateau. The Caps got goals from seven different players in the contest.

A four-game road trip in mid-December proved fruitful; the Caps went 3-0-1 with a tie in Minnesota and wins in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and on Long Island. The Caps outscored their foes 11-3 in the three wins.

The 5-1 win over the Isles on December 23 was particularly inspiring. It was Washington's first ever triumph on the Island, ending a 0-17-1 stretch of Washington futility at the Nassau Coliseum. The Isles outscored the Capitals by a collective 89-39 over that 18-game span.

PAGE TWO

TEAM

Movin' On Up

The Capitals 1982-83 season

By Mike Vogel

The run of prosperity came screeching to a halt on December 26 against the Flyers at the Capital Centre. Philly scored three first period goals to take a 3-0 lead. The Caps didn't get on the board until Mike Gartner's goal at 12:02 of the second but managed to even the score with three quick ones. However, Philly came out strong in the third. Mark Howe scored at the 26-second mark and the Flyers followed up with two more to take away a 6-3 win.



Bobby Carpenter

The Caps got back on the winning side of the ledger immediately, skating off with a 6-3 win over the Penguins in their very next game.

After an embarrassing 7-2 home ice loss on New Year's Day, the Caps grabbed consecutive wins over Quebec and Detroit. At that point - January 5 - Washington stood 19-11-10 exactly halfway through the season. In its eight previous seasons, Washington had never earned its 19th win earlier than February 1 and was never at or above .500 when it did reach the 19-win level.

The Caps then went into a minor tailspin, going winless in their next five (0-4-1). Especially painful was a January 11 loss to the Kings at the Cap Centre. LA scored twice in the first minute and a half of the game, but the Caps came back to take a 4-3 lead on Dennis Maruk's 22nd goal of the season at 5:30 of the middle period. The Caps also led 5-4 before the Kings knotted the score at 12:03 of the second. Los Angeles went on to win a wild one, 9-7.

Washington then dropped both ends of a home-and-home set with Buffalo to extend the skid to five. January 18 brought the Philadelphia Flyers to Landover, but only 10,981 spectators bothered to show up. The Caps took a 3-1 lead to the locker room for the second intermission. Bengt Gustafsson wasted little time in icing the game for the Caps. Just five seconds after the puck dropped to open the third period, Gustafsson netted his eighth goal of the season. To this day, it remains the fastest goal ever scored by a Capital at the start of a period.

The Caps flew to Chicago immediately after the victory over Philly. Bobby Carpenter's two-goal effort paced the Caps to a 6-4 win over Chicago. After a loss to the Nordiques, the Caps reeled off three straight victories. Six different Caps scored in a 6-2 win over the Penguins in Pittsburgh on January 26. Two nights later, the two teams finished up the home-and-home set with a tilt at the Capital Centre. This time, seven different Washington skaters found the back of the net in a convincing 7-2 win over the Pens. Craig Laughlin and Gustafsson

seven seconds apart, breaking the franchise record of eight seconds set when Jean Lemieux and Nelson Pyatt scored twice in eight seconds against Detroit on February 15, 1976.

On January 29, the Caps traveled to hostile territory, namely the Montreal Forum. The Caps had never gained so much as a single point in the building, having gone 0-21-0 in the building during the first eight seasons of their NHL existence. The Flying Frenchmen outscored the Caps by a total of 112-35 over that span. Dennis Maruk got the Caps off to a strong start, scoring the game's first two goals to give Washington a 2-0 lead. When Alan Haworth scored with only 8:18 remaining in the third, it gave the Caps a 3-1 lead. Alas, Washington's first win in Montreal was not to be. Late goals by Guy Carbonneau and Gilbert Delorme (Delorme's came with only 1:04 left in the game) knotted the score at 3-3 and forced Washington to settle for a tie and its first ever road point against the Habs. The tie extended Washington's overall unbeaten string to four (3-0-1).

Washington would win its next three games and then forge a tie with Quebec to extend the unbeaten streak to eight games. Included in that group of games was a hard fought defensive struggle against the Minnesota North Stars at the Cap Centre on February 3. The Caps could muster only 14 shots on goal against Stars' netminder Gilles Meloche but Gustafsson, Ted Bulley and Gaetan Duchesne all scored in a 3-1 Washington win. The Stars managed only 19 shots on goal of their own against the Capitals' Al Jensen. The total of 33 shots on goal for both teams was the fewest ever in a Washington game, eclipsing the previous low of 36 established on November 15, 1979 against Boston.

With a 5-4 triumph over New Jersey in their 55th game of the season on February 5, the Caps equaled the franchise's single season mark for wins at 27. The Caps set a new mark when they recorded their 28th win of the campaign against Winnipeg on February 13. The 6-1 triumph over the Jets was also Washington's sixth straight win on home ice, tying a club record. In typical Caps' fashion, six different skaters accounted for the six goals.

After the win over Winnipeg, the Caps embarked on a six-game road trip, their longest of the season. After a 5-4 loss to the Rangers in New York, Washington went west. Two third period goals gave the Caps a narrow 2-1 win over the Canucks on February 18. After a tie in Los Angeles and a loss in Edmonton, the Capitals recorded their 30th win of the season in Calgary on February 24. Alan Haworth's hat trick led the way in the Caps' 4-2 win over the Flames. Washington concluded the trip with another in a seemingly endless series of losses to the Canadiens in Montreal on February 26.



Rod Langway with team president, Dick Patrick

The Caps hosted the high-flying Edmonton Oilers before a sold out throng of 18,130 at the Capital Centre on March 2. After falling behind 3-1, the Caps drew even on goals by Gustafsson and Haworth. But Glenn Anderson scored on an Oiler power play with 5:37 left in the third to give the visitors the lead. Wayne Gretzky tallied his 56th of the season into an empty net to seal a 5-3 Edmonton victory.

Washington then took three straight, beating the Rangers in New York, the

Flyers at home and the Devils in Jersey. Caps goaltender Al Jensen registered his 18th win of the season against Philly, tying the franchise record for most victories in a single season. Jensen established the new franchise mark of 19 wins when he beat the Bruins by a 6-4 score on the afternoon of March 13.

After a 6-2 loss to the Isles at Nassau on March 12, the Caps ran off four straight wins and went unbeaten in their next six (5-0-1). With a 5-4 win over Hartford at the Capital Centre on March 16, Washington matched its franchise standard with its 20th home ice victory of the season. The Capitals followed that game up with consecutive road wins in Boston and Philadelphia, two traditionally troublesome cities for Washington.

The Caps and Canucks skated to a 1-1 tie at the Cap Centre on March 23 in a make-up contest of a February 11 game that was postponed because of a snowstorm. Washington then defeated the Devils for its 21st Cap Centre win of the season, a new franchise record. At this stage of the season, the Capitals had 91 points by virtue of a 38-22-15 record. Washington had gone 19-7-4 over its past 30 games to effectively cement its first ever postseason berth.

The Caps closed out the campaign by going 1-3-1 in their final five games. Included among those losses was a thorough 7-1 home ice thumping at the hands of the Islanders on March 30. Longtime Cap killer Mike Bossy netted his 58th and 59th goals of the season in that one.

Washington's last road game of the season was also a memorable one. The Caps journeyed to Detroit on April 1 and got out to a 2-0 first period lead over the host Red Wings. It turned into a high-scoring, seesaw affair thereafter. When it was over, the Caps were on the short end of an 8-7 decision. With the start of the playoffs just days away, Washington had surrendered 15 goals in its last two games and 20 in its last three.

The Caps closed out the season on a winning note, blanking the Rangers before a disinterested gathering of 10,219 at the Cap Centre on April 3. Pat Riffin started in goal for Washington but Al Jensen came on in relief to earn the win, his 30th as a member of the Capitals. That tied him with Ron Low atop the team's all-time list for wins by a goaltender.



**Bob Gould, right, battles
the Edmonton Oilers**

For their first-ever playoff series, the Capitals drew the Islanders, who were three-time defending Stanley Cup champions at the time. Heading into that best-of-five set, Washington was given little chance of advancing. The Caps were 1-20-1 lifetime during the regular season against New York.

Game One was played at Nassau Coliseum on April 6. Bob Gould got the Caps on the board first. He scored a power play goal at 4:01 of the first with help from Dennis Maruk. Gould also netted Washington's only other goal in what turned out to be a 5-2 loss to the Isles. Bryan Trottier led the way for the winners with a pair of power play strikes.

Game Two was on the very next night. After a scoreless first, Gould again got the Caps going midway through the second with his third goal of the young series. After New York's Bobby Nystrom tied it, the Caps regained the lead when Maruk scored at 18:47 of the second. The red-hot Gould potted his fourth of the playoffs and second of the game early in the third to give the Caps a 3-1 lead. Denis Potvin made it close at 14:29 but Carpenter iced it for the Caps with an unassisted goal at 16:08. Washington had its first ever playoff win, a 4-2 triumph, and had evened the series at 1-1. Jensen was the game-winning goaltender.

The series shifted to Landover for Game Three. New York took control on two first period goals by Bob Bourne. Trottier also scored twice and the Isles rolled to a 6-2 win, stopping 11 Washington power play chances in the process. The Caps didn't get on the scoreboard until the third period when they got goals from Craig Laughlin and Scott Stevens.

New York wrapped up the series with a 6-3 win over the Caps on April 10. Gould netted his fifth goal in four games in the losing cause. He was Washington's leading scorer during the playoffs. Glen Currie was second with three assists.

The Caps had much to be proud of, though. It was easily Washington's best season ever and the team allowed a record low 283 goals. Three different Caps (Mike Gartner, 38; Bobby Carpenter, 32 and Dennis Maruk, 31) scored more than 30 goals and four others (Ken Houston, 25; Alan Haworth, 23; Bengt Gustafsson and Bobby Gould, 22) eclipsed the 20-goal plateau. Milan Novy (18), Gaetan Duchesne (18) and Craig Laughlin (17) knocked on the door of the 20-goal club.

Langway became the first Capital ever to win a major NHL award when he copped the Norris Trophy, awarded annually to the league's best defenseman.

The Caps were not only staying in DC, they were on their way to becoming one of the league's most consistent and dominating franchises of the 1980s, playoffs notwithstanding, of course.

PAGE ONE

TEAM

The Century Mark

By Mike Vogel

A look at the Capitals 1983-84 season

With the initial hurdle of reaching the playoffs having been cleared in the spring of 1983, second year general manager David Poile set about making the Capitals better and aiming for a deeper run into the postseason tournament.

Poile made his first big move of the offseason on June 8 when he dealt the club's first round pick in the Entry Draft to Winnipeg in exchange for American-born right wing Dave Christian, a member of the fabled 1980 US Olympic Hockey Team. Christian had scored 20-plus goals in each of his first two full NHL campaigns but suffered a torn shoulder in December of 1982 and saw his production drop to 18 goals as a result of the injury and the games missed.

A month later, Poile made another big splash when he sent leading scorer and fan favorite Dennis Maruk to the Minnesota North Stars in exchange for a second rounder in the 1984 NHL Entry Draft. In the buy low, sell high world of the NHL talent market, Poile correctly assessed that it was time to move Maruk but it seemed as though he got little in return for a guy who was merely two seasons removed from the greatest campaign (60 goals, 76 assists in 1981-82) in franchise history. Maruk played six more seasons but never again reached the 20-goal plateau nor did he eclipse the 60-point barrier. (The Capitals drafted Steve Leach with the second rounder in '84.)



Goaltender Pat Riggin

Days before the start of the season, Poile dealt tough guy Torrie Robertson to the Hartford Whalers for left wing Greg C. Adams. The Caps and head coach Bryan Murray were then set for the October 6 season opener at Philadelphia.

With Pat Riggin in goal for Washington, the Caps got on the board first in the final minute of the opening period. Alan Haworth tallied for the Caps with Christian gaining a helper for his point in a Washington uniform. That would be all the Washington offense for the evening; Philly scored four unanswered goals on its way to a 4-1 triumph.

The home opener was a sparsely attended (11,774) affair against the Caps' longtime Long Island nemesis, the Islanders. When Gaetan Duchesne scored with 2:19 remaining in the second period, he gave the Caps a seemingly insurmountable 5-1 lead. But just eight seconds later, noted Cap killer Mike Bossy scored his fifth goal of the young season. With just seconds left in the second, New York's Brent Sutter tallied to close the gap to two. Washington's Craig Laughlin got one back early in the third but the Isles eventually evened it up with three straight third period goals. Washington's Bengt Gustafsson restored the Capital lead at 7-6 with a power play goal at 17:52 of the third. But

Bob Nystrom's goal with 56 second left in regulation sent the Caps into overtime for the first time in their regular season history. Bob Bourne lifted the Fishermen to an 8-7 win with a goal at 2:01 of the extra session, spoiling the Caps' home opener.

Back on the road, the Caps squandered a 2-1 lead in a 5-2 defeat at Buffalo. Then they lost three different leads in a 5-3 setback to the Rangers in New York. A 4-0 home ice loss to the Penguins followed and then there was a 4-2 setback to the Quebec Nordiques at the Cap Centre. Coming off the best season of its existence, Washington was suddenly 0-6-0 and had regressed to its previous incarnation as expansion fodder.

Poile picked up the phone and picked up a future Hall of Fame defenseman. On October 18, Poile sent defenseman Brian Engblom and right wing Ken Houston to Los Angeles in exchange for Larry Murphy, then at the beginning of his fourth NHL season. The fourth player chosen overall in the 1980 NHL Entry draft, Murphy had averaged nearly 20 goals and 70 points per season over his first three NHL campaigns.

Murphy was not in the lineup when the Caps absorbed a 3-0 blanking in Hartford on October 19. When Washington lugged its 0-7-0 record back to DC for an October 22 game against the Flyers, Murphy was in the lineup wearing sweater number eight. The newest Capital did not figure into the scoring as Washington finally earned its first victory of the season, a 4-1 win over Philly.

Immediately after disposing of the Flyers, the Caps embarked on a five-game road trip. The journey began with goaltender Al Jensen authoring consecutive shutouts in Pittsburgh (1-0) and New Jersey (2-0). Jensen and the Caps then went to Minnesota, where the netminder extended his shutout streak to 154:06 before Neil Broten beat him at 4:45 of the second period. By that time, the Capitals had already built a 4-0 lead on their way to a 6-1 victory, their fourth in a row.

On October 30, the Caps roared into Winnipeg. After the Jets got on the board first, Mike Gartner notched a natural hat trick, Bobby Gould scored twice and Murphy finally picked up his first goal and point as a Capital to pace Washington to a 7-3 win.

The Caps toted their five-game winning streak and a 5-7 record into Edmonton for the final game of the trip on November 2. But the hosts proved to be inhospitable. The Oilers treated the Caps rudely, ushering them to an 11-3 thumping with Wayne Gretzky (two goals, three assists) leading the way.

The Capitals returned to Washington and to the win column with a 5-4 win over the Vancouver Canucks on November 4. Only 10,939 fans showed up for the Friday night tilt at the Capital Centre. Those who were in attendance witnessed Washington's first-ever regular season overtime victory. Bengt Gustafsson netted his seventh of the season at 1:01 of the extra session to lift the Caps over the Canucks.

Two nights later, the Caps recorded a 3-2 win over the Detroit Red Wings. Eighteen-year-old Wings rookie Steve Yzerman earned third star honors in his first appearance at the Capital Centre. The victory over Detroit lifted the Caps to within a game of the break-even point at 7-8-0.

Washington had an opportunity to reach the .500 mark when Edmonton came calling to the Cap Centre on November 9. The Oilers took a 3-2 lead into the third period and then blew it open with four tallies in the final frame. Edmonton prevailed by a 7-4 score. Jari Kurri scored twice and Wayne Gretzky had a goal and four assists. Only 11,495 fans turned out to see The Great One ply his trade on a Wednesday night in Landover.

Murphy scored a pair of goals in a 7-4 win over the Rangers on November 12. That game closed out a four-game homestand and again brought the Caps to within a game of .500.



Dave Christian

Washington won only one of its next five games, a 7-1 spanking of the defending Stanley Cup champion New York Islanders at the Capital Centre. Alan Haworth scored twice and Bengt Gustafsson contributed a goal and three assists to the cause. The Capitals established a new club record by scoring a power play goal in their 11th straight game. Washington outshot the Isles 24-4 in the first period, tying a team mark for shots in a period. The Caps outshot the Isles 45-14 on the night.

Immediately after a 3-1 win over the Rangers at the Cap Centre on November 25, the Caps traveled north to Montreal where they were winless in 23 previous visits (0-22-1) and had been outscored by a combined 139-39 in the process. When Washington departed Montreal, they left the monkey there. Bobby Carpenter and Bobby Gould each scored a pair of goals to lead the Caps to a 5-2 win over the Habs. The satisfying victory also brought the Caps to within a game of .500 again.

Washington enjoyed two off days before a tilt against the Nordiques in Quebec but could not hold on to a 3-2 second period lead. The Nords scored four unanswered goals to register a 6-3 win and deny Washington another bid at reaching the elusive .500 level.

The Caps opened December with an 8-4 win over New Jersey to again climb to within a game of .500. But a three-game winless skid followed, dropping Washington three games beneath sea level.

Only 7,455 fans turned out to see the Caps clip Calgary 4-3 on December 8. Gary McAdam, acquired on waivers from New Jersey weeks earlier, scored the game-winner with just 2:06 remaining. It would be the only goal McAdam would score during his two-month, 24-game stint with the Caps; he would be sold back to the Devils in mid-January.

Al Jensen blanked the Habs by a 2-0 count at the Capital Centre on December 10 but once again, Washington was unable to get to .500. The Caps were crushed by the Flyers, 9-4 in their next game. Jensen was pulled in the second after allowing seven goals on 27 shots.

With a 3-1 win in Toronto on December 17 and a 5-0 whitewash of the Kings at the Capital Centre, Washington finally climbed the .500 mountain and got back

to even-Steven at 16-16-2. The Caps then split a home-and-home set with the Islanders, losing 6-1 on Long Island and winning 7-3 - on the strength of a Gustafsson hat trick - at the Cap Centre. They headed into the holiday break still at .500.

Coming out of the holiday break and into the New Year, the Caps dropped two straight and went 2-3-1 overall. After squandering a 2-0 home ice lead in a 4-2 loss to Buffalo at the Capital Centre on January 7, the Capitals journeyed north on I-95 to Philadelphia for a January 8 date with the Flyers. Philly's Dave Poulin scored the first goal of the game at 5:20 of the first, but it was all Capitals - and specifically, all Bengt Gustafsson - after that. The Caps scored seven unanswered goals on their way to a 7-1 victory. Gustafsson set a club record by scoring five goals against fellow Swede Pelle Lindbergh. Two of Gustafsson's goals came on the power play and four were assisted by Mike Gartner. The convincing triumph over Philly lifted the Caps to .500 (20-20-3) once again.

It took 44 games, but the Caps finally made it to the other side of the .500 mountain with a 4-2 win over the Los Angeles Kings on January 11. Washington had finally grabbed hold of some momentum and was not about to let go. The Caps lost a 3-2 heartbreaker in Calgary on January 15 and forged a 2-2 tie with the Sabres in Buffalo on January 25, but those were the only two blemishes on Washington's record over a 42-day span, the longest and best sustained period of hockey in the franchise's 10-year history.

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TEAM

The Century Mark

By Mike Vogel

A look at the Capitals 1983-84 season

White-hot Washington went 16-1-1 over that stretch to go from near .500 to the upper reaches of the highly competitive Prince of Wales Conference. The Capitals outshot their opponents in 16 straight games during that stretch of hockey - shattering the old club record of nine - and outscored the opposition by a combined 90-32 over the 18 games of NHL dominance. Washington scored more than three goals in 14 of those 18 games; it allowed more than three goals just once over the same period of time.

Special teams also played a key role in Washington's streak of steamrolling. The Capitals netted at least one power play goal in 14 of the 18 games and scored multiple power play tallies in eight of the 18. The Caps went 23-for-81 (28.4 percent) on the power play over the 18-game stretch.



Bengt Gustafsson

The team's penalty killing unit was also on top of its game. Washington allowed a power play goal in only seven of the 18 games and never surrendered more than one in any single contest. The Caps successfully killed 60 of 67 (89.6 percent) man disadvantage situations over the 18 games and had a streak of 33 straight kills at one point.

There were several notable highlights during the 16-1-1 streak:

- On January 17, the Caps thumped the Jets by an 8-3 score in front of only 9,878 fans at the Capital Centre. Murphy scored the first goal of the game at the 11-second mark of the first and Gartner made it 2-0 at 1:18. Gartner totaled two goals and four points on the night; Murphy had two goals and an assist.
- Dave Christian had two goals and two assists in a 5-3 win over the Blackhawks on January 20.
- Trailing the Penguins by a 2-1 score on the road in the third period, Washington got goals from Alan Haworth and Christian in the final three minutes of regulation to steal a win.
- The Caps crushed Toronto and former teammate Mike Palmateer in Washington on January 27, beating the Leafs 6-1. The Caps induced Palmateer into taking a pair of slashing minors and scored on one of the ensuing power plays. Gustafsson established a new career high by netting his 26th goal of the season.
- A night later, the two teams met again in Toronto. The Caps treated Palmateer even more rudely, beating him 8-0 behind Pat Riggin's 24-save performance in the Washington nets. Craig Laughlin and Gaetan Duchesne

each scored a pair of goals.

- Riggins authored a second straight shutout with a 2-0 whitewash of the Devils on February 2. Scott Stevens broke up a scoreless tie with a power play goal at 11:31 of the third period and Doug Jarvis added a late empty-netter.
- The Caps dropped the Canadiens 4-1 on February 3 with Riggins pushing his shutout streak to a club record 203 minutes and 52 seconds before the Habs' Pierre Mondou scored at 9:44 of the second.
- The Caps crushed Edmonton by a 9-2 score in a Sunday matinee contest on February 5. Gartner had two goals and two assists, tying and breaking Dennis Maruk's all-time franchise record for career goals in the process. Washington scored six goals against Edmonton's Grant Fuhr in the third period to blow it open. The Caps set a team record for fastest three goals (39 seconds) and fastest five goals (seven minutes, 33 seconds) in the game. A sellout crowd of 18,130 showed up despite the fact that superstar Wayne Gretzky was out of the lineup with a bruised shoulder, an injury that ended his consecutive games played streak at 362.
- The Caps rebounded from a 3-1 second period deficit to take a 6-3 decision from the Philadelphia Flyers before a packed house of 18,130 at the Cap Centre on February 11.
- Riggins stopped 37 shots to shut out the Minnesota North Stars 4-0 at the Met Center on February 13.
- The Caps got third period goals from Haworth, Bobby Carpenter and Doug Jarvis to record their fifth straight road win, a 4-2 triumph over the Blues in St. Louis. Washington also extended its road unbeaten streak to seven. The late goals erased a 2-1 St. Louis lead.
- Riggins was named the NHL's Player of the Week in consecutive weeks during the streak. The Washington goaltender captured league honors for the weeks ending January 30 and February 6. He later followed up with a third Player of the Week designation for the week ending March 12 and remains the only Capital to have earned the honor three times in a single season.

The Caps came back to earth in late February, losing three straight and four of five. After winning the first three games of a seven-game trip, the Caps dropped an overtime decision in Winnipeg and then suffered losses in Chicago and Detroit. Washington wound up its journey on a winning note with a 4-3 victory over the Whalers in Hartford but it was edged 3-2 by Vancouver at the Capital Centre on February 28, its first home game in 17 days.

Washington then went on to win six straight and go unbeaten in eight straight at the beginning of March. The Caps crushed Pittsburgh 9-1 at the Cap Centre on March 1. Defenseman Peter Andersson scored his first two NHL goals for Washington in that game. Both of Andersson's goals came on the power play, representing half of the Capitals' total of four power play strikes on the night.

The Capital streak ended with a 5-3 defeat at the hands of the St. Louis Blues on March 18. Washington promptly rebounded, winning four straight and five of six to close out the regular season. With Riggins in goal, the Caps shutout the hapless Penguins 6-0 on March 24. Pittsburgh was in the process of tanking its season so it could set itself up for the first overall pick and snag Mario Lemieux in the upcoming NHL Entry Draft. The Pens went 16-58-6 that year, going 7-35-1 after December 26 and dropping their last six games of the season to edge out New Jersey by three points in the Lemieux sweepstakes.

In a 6-2 win over the Devils on March 28, Laughlin scored his 20th goal of the season, becoming the seventh Capital to reach that plateau. He joined teammates Gartner, Christian, Gustafsson, Carpenter, Haworth and Gould in the 20-goal club. The seven 20-goal getters tied a Washington franchise record.

Any hope of a first-ever Patrick Division title disappeared when the Caps dropped a 3-1 decision to the Islanders at the Capital Centre on March 31.

The Capitals closed out the regular season with a 4-1 victory over the Flyers in Philadelphia on April 1. The Caps finished at 48-27-5 and totaled a franchise record 101 points. Washington wound up three points behind the Islanders for the Patrick Division crown and joined the Isles, Boston (104 points) and Buffalo (103) as one of four Wales Conference teams to reach the century mark in points that season.

Washington allowed only 226 goals, the fewest in the NHL by 31 goals over Buffalo, the next closest club. It was also by far the fewest goals ever allowed by a Washington club, eclipsing the previous mark by 57.

The Capitals drew Philadelphia in the first round of the playoffs. The best-of-five series opened at the Capital Centre on April 4. Philly captain Bobby Clarke, playing in the last of his 15 NHL campaigns, scored on Washington's Pat Riggin at 5:21 of the first to give the Flyers an early lead. Laughlin tied it for the Caps midway through the first but Philly regained the lead on Ilkka Sinisalo's power play goal at 4:51 of the second. After that, it was all Washington. The Caps scored three unanswered goals on their way to a 4-2 win and a 1-0 lead in the series.

Game Two took place at the Cap Centre the very next evening. The script was similar; the Flyers scored first and took a 2-1 lead on what would prove to be the final goal of Clarke's NHL career (against Washington's Al Jensen) at 17:21 of the first period. The Caps then responded with five straight tallies to earn a 6-2 win and take a commanding 2-0 lead in the series. Six different Capitals dented the twine behind beleaguered Philly netminder Bob Froese.

The series went to Philly for Game Three on April 7. Washington wasted no time in putting the chokehold on the Flyers. The Caps scored two in the first and three in the second on their way to a 5-1 win and a series sweep. Again, it was five different Washington players recording the goals in Game Three.

For their Division Finals opponent, the Caps drew the four-time defending Stanley Cup champion New York Islanders, who were fresh off their 17th straight playoff series win, a grueling five-game battle against the rival Rangers. The Islanders had ousted the Capitals from the playoffs the previous spring in Washington's maiden playoff voyage.

The '84 series opened on Long Island on April 12. The Capitals spotted their hosts a 2-0 lead and then came back to earn a 3-2 win on Laughlin's goal with just 1:02 remaining in regulation.



Game Two took place in the same place on the following evening. With Jensen between the pipes for Washington, the Isles scored three



Craig Laughlin

goals in the first 9:49 to take a 3-0 lead. Soon afterwards, New York's John Tonelli and Ken Morrow were both whistled for minor penalties, giving the Capitals a 5-on-3 advantage. Gustafsson scored while the Caps were up two men to get Washington on the board. Forty-eight seconds later, he scored again with the Caps still on the power play to draw Washington within one. Gartner and Stevens assisted on both Gustafsson goals. Longtime nemesis Mike Bossy scored for the Isles at 13:39, however, to give New York a two-goal lead. The Bossy goal ended Jensen's evening of work. He allowed four goals on only 10 shots before yielding to Riggin.

The Washington power play got the Caps back into the game. At 6:21 of the second, Stevens scored from Jarvis and Gustafsson while the Caps enjoyed one of their seven manpower advantages of the evening. With 7:05 remaining in regulation and the Islanders' Dave Langevin off for tripping, Gartner evened the game at 4-4 with Washington's fourth power play goal of the evening. Riggin continued to contain the Islanders' attack and the game went into overtime.

Each team got two shots on goal in the extra session, but New York made good on its second one when Anders Kallur beat Riggin to even the series at 1-1

A sellout crowd showed up at the Capital Centre on April 15 to cheer on the home team in Game Three. After a scoreless first period, Haworth got the Caps on the board at 5:05 of the second. But Pat Flatley tied it late in the second and Brent Sutter scored the go-ahead marker at 14:28 of the third. Bryan Trottier iced it with a last-minute empty-netter. New York left the building with a 3-1 win and a 2-1 edge in the series.

A night later, the two clubs met again at the Cap Centre. With Riggin in goal for Washington, the Isles took a 3-0 lead on goals by Trottier, Clark Gillies and Paul Boutilier. Trailing 3-0 at the start of the third, Capitals coach Bryan Murray inserted Jensen in goal for his team at the outset of the final frame. The Capitals awakened when Carpenter scored at 5:05 and Christian followed with another just 34 seconds later. The Caps pressed hard for the equalizer - outshooting the Isles 12-5 in the third - but Gillies took the wind out of Washington's sails when he netted his second of the game at 16:18. This time it was Bossy who scored into an empty net in the game's final minute. With a 5-2 win, the Islanders had pushed the Capitals to the brink of elimination.

The series returned to Nassau Coliseum on Long Island for Game Five on April 18. Jensen was Murray's choice as the starter in goal. Jarvis and Christian scored first period goals to stake Washington to a 2-0 lead, but Trottier got the Isles on the board just 1:18 into the second. Flatley scored at 9:15 to tie it and Kallur put the Isles ahead 3-2 with a shorthanded goal just over a minute later. Flatley scored his second of the game and New York's fourth of the period on an Islander power play at 16:21. Carpenter scored a power play goal for the Caps with only 23 seconds remaining in the second to give Washington some hope of a third period comeback.

But it was not to be. The Isles stifled the Caps, limiting them to a mere five shots on goal in the third. Riggins relieved Jensen at 3:20 of the third and kept his team in it until Greg Gilbert's goal with 1:43 remaining. The Isles had their 18th consecutive playoff series win and Washington was finished until the fall.

The best season in franchise history meant some postseason hardware for the Capitals. Defenseman Rod Langway copped his second straight Norris Trophy and Doug Jarvis made away with the Selke Trophy, awarded annually to the NHL's best defensive forward. Goaltenders Riggins and Jensen shared the Jennings Trophy, awarded to the club with the fewest goals against each season. And coach Bryan Murray won the Adams Trophy as the league's best bench boss. Murray rallied his troops after an 0-7 start, guiding them to a franchise best 101-point season and their first-ever playoff series win.

There was a lot of optimism in the Caps' camp even after the club's playoff exit. Washington had established itself as one of the league's stingiest defensive clubs and the Caps had gone 48-20-5 after a slow start. They also went 30-8-2 in the season's second half and 13-3-1 in their last 17 games.

The feeling in the front office was that the club was solid, getting better and would soon contend for the Stanley Cup. As a result, there would be no personnel moves of note heading into the upcoming season.

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